

Reclamation, Restoration, Redemption

by TheAmateur

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Summary: During the Great War, most Sangheili enter the Covenant military filled with religious fervor and devotion to the Prophets...but the veterans that leave the military are often cynical and jaded towards their leaders. How does this transformation occur?

1. Chapter 1: Fated

Prologue

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><p>Chapter One: Fated

23**rd**** Age of Doubt, 58****th**** Cycle

>Sanghelios, Urs Prime System

Uros 'Oenairemee allowed himself a faint grin when the city of Rhei came into view. To be technical, he did not actually see the city itselfâ€"only the aura of Rhei's millions of glowing lights, as it was well past midnight.

Rhei was the capital of Ovarum; an island-state of respectable size, several kilometers off the northwest coast of the Yermo landmass. Many of Ovarum's commonersâ€"the ones who did not join the Covenant military, for whatever reasonâ€"were fishermen by trade, or some other craft related to the sea, due to the island-state's maritime location.

As Uros noted when Rhei finally came completely into view, Sangheili cities were a strange mix of old and new. Buildings that looked like they belonged in the Feudal Era of ages past housed modern technology and accommodations. Hovercars sped down the cobblestone streets alongside nex-drawn carriages. Plasma torch-lanterns illuminated the main roads while the smaller streets were lit by lamps and candles, as well as shop lights.

Uros preferred the countryside to the city. As an Elder of the State of Oenairem, he resided in Oenairem Keep—the seat of power in his state—but he would much rather have lived in a private estate in the hills, insulated from the bustle of city life. Unfortunately, the Oenairem Kaidon considered Uros to be one of his best advisors, and so he requested that the Elder live in the keep.

While it had been nothing more than a request, Uros was not the sort to refuse. His personal preference was not a priority.

The engines of Uros's landspeeder blazed a brighter whitish-blue as the Elder floored the accelerator as far as it could go. Within the hour, he was off the highway and speeding down the main boulevard that ran straight through to the heart of Rhei, where Ovarum Keep was located.

The Keep itself was situated on top of a high knoll that overlooked the rest of the city. The Keep was almost its own village within a city—had the rest of the city been taken away, the Keep would still have been able to sustain itself with no real trouble. The same was true for most—if not all Keeps throughout the myriad States of the homeworld and the colonies.

Uros 'Oenairemee was in Rhei because he had been invited by Niro 'Ovarumee, his old friend and fellow veteran of the most recent crusade against the Heretics. It had been that campaign that had broken the back of the Heretics' forces and reduced them to splintered groups that had to resort to the dishonorable practices of guerilla warfare.

Niro was also the newly-elected Kaidon of Ovarum, after the previous Kaidon died of old age.

It took only a short while for Uros to make his way through the capital city—after all, the main boulevard was virtually empty at this time of night. In the early morning, a good amount of the city populace would wake and head out onto the straits while the rest of the city roused itself.

When Uros reached one of the Keep's gates, he checked in with a pair of State Guardsmen and gained entry to the compound. The Oenairem Elder slowed down and parked his landspeeder in the Keep's communal vehicle bay. He dismounted and removed his wind goggles, leaving them in the driver's seat. The Elder then locked the vehicle's controls and took his leave, stepping out of the bay's open front and into the Keep compound.

The Keep itself wasn't a single building, as its name would suggest—it was more of a small district than anything else. The homes of the Elders, the home of the Kaidon, and the Assembly building all collectively formed the 'Keep' of Ovarum State. Back in the old days, the Keep would have been a castle or a citadel in a walled city, but the need for castles had declined millenia ago with the rise of industry.

Uros looked to the east as he stepped out into the crisp, pre-dawn morning. The suns were starting to rise—already, he could see the bluish-pink glow of Urs, the largest of the three suns, creeping over the horizon, brightening the night. It had actually been that sun

after which Uros had been named.

There were many homes in the Keep. The Ovarum Elders lived in the larger estates, while those who shared their lineage lived in the smaller homes. Not all of the Elders lived in the Keep—many of them had estates in the smaller cities or the countryside—but all of them were present today. After all, their new Kaidon was going to be officially inducted into office at noon. Such an event required all of the Elders to be present.

The Oenairem Elder was honored that the new Ovarum Kaidon had invited him to attend his Induction. Uros knew that his old friend would appreciate his presence—after everything they had both been through during the most recent conflict with the Heretics, they'd developed a close friendship. But Uros knew of another probable reason why his old friend would request his presence.

Kaidons were elected by the Elders of their state. However, there were usually Elders who dissented with who they elected as the new Kaidon. And in many cases, a dissenting Elder would send assassins to try and kill the newly-elected clan leader. It wasn't against the law, either; Elders had the right to attempt to assassinate a newly-elected Kaidon. The philosophy was that a leader who wasn't able to defend himself was unworthy of leading his clan. Therefore, if a Kaidon was killed in the assassination attempt, no action would be taken against the instigating Elder.

However, the axe bit both ways. Should the assassination attempt fail, the offending Elder was normally executed, along with his family. Although, sometimes the Kaidon would simply banish an offending Elder's family, rather than have them killed, depending on many factors, including the Kaidon's mood.

Such practices were not uncommon—Kaidons had been tested in this way since the Feudal Era, when Sanghelios had been ruled by warlords.

Niro 'Ovarumee was a newly-elected Kaidon, and Uros knew that not all of the Elders had supported his friend's ascension. The Oenairem Elder knew that there would likely be an attempt on his Niro's life.

Uros made his way up the hill, exchanging nods with the handful of other people he passed by along the way. The new Kaidon's home was similar to Uros's own—smaller than most of the other Elders' homes, and made of brick and wood, rather than stone and alloy. Smoke puffed from one of its chimneys, and the smell of breakfast wafted out from the open windows.

The Oenairem Elder's stomach rumbled as he caught a whiff of what he guessed were flatcakes and grahla bacon. He had been traveling since yesterday evening and was quite happy that he seemed to have arrived in time for a morning meal.

Uros walked up to the home's door and rapped on it three times. There was a slight scuffle inside as someone dropped what they were doing and hurried to the door. Uros backed up when he heard the snick of the door's bolt being slid out of its locked position.

The door opened, and Uros found himself staring down the glowing

green barrel of a plasma pistol. The wielder of the pistol was a short, lean woman dressed in a simple blue robe. Her yellowish-green eyes were tinged a bloodshot purple with wearinessâ€”she obviously hadn't gotten much sleep lately. And with good reason.

"Is this how you welcome old friends into your household, Surra?" Uros raised his brow calluses, waiting patiently for the woman to realize who he was.

The woman faltered when she saw who she was pointing the weapon at, and her mandibles relaxed slightly in relief. "Our home is your home," she bowed her head slightly and stepped back, lowering the plasma pistol and allowing her visitor into the house. "You are early, Uros," she sighed as she headed back towards the kitchen. "My husband told me to expect you after sunrise."

"From the smell of your cooking, I would say that I was right on time," Uros countered, drawing his mandibles back in a grin.

Surra's cheeks flushed mauve. "You flatter me," she chuckled. "Accept my apologies for the less-than-warm welcomeâ€”I feared you were someone else."

"Your apprehension was appropriate, but unnecessary," Uros replied. "If the assassins come, I doubt they will knock."

"_The ears suggest the arrival of an old friend!_" a low, gravelly voice called out from the upper floor of the house, accompanied by footsteps on the staircase. A tall, burly, light brown-skinned man stepped into the kitchen, tying his robe around himself. His mandibles drew back in a grin as he saw Uros, a friendly gleam coming to his orange eyes. "And the eyes reveal a witless bum, come to steal my wife's cooking."

"Niro, my old friend," Uros embraced his friend and clasped his hand in a handshake. "On the count of me being a witless bum, I fear you are mistaken. On the other count, however, I confess you speak the truth; I haven't had a meal for nearly a day."

"Well, let it never be said that a man went hungry in _my_ household," Surra returned to the stove and finished making the breakfast that had been left incomplete from Uros's interruption. "Take a seat."

The two men sat at the table while Surra served both of them the flatcakes and grahla bacon she had been preparing. She then served herself and sat down next to her husband.

Uros drenched his flatcakes in white syrup and wolfed them down. He would layer the grahla bacon on top of the flatcakes and eat them both at the same time. When he was finished, he licked his mandibles clean and washed everything down with some skyfruit juice.

The Oenairem Elder patted his belly and gave a quiet belch. Burping was encouraged in most parts of Yermo, as a gesture of gratitude for a good meal. "A breakfast fit for the Gods," he declared, rising from his seat and leaving his wooden plate and cup in the sink. "I pray I shall be able to taste one of your dinners before I return home."

"I see no reason why your prayers should go unanswered," Surra

chuckled. "I think my dear husband could learn a thing or two from you; he never quite manages to match your level of flattery."

Niro cleared his throat loudly, getting up from the table as well. "Let us walk," he said to his old friend, turning to his wife as he stood up and telling her, "We'll take our leave."

"Please keep safe," Surra called after the two men.

Niro followed Uros out the door and closed it behind him. They walked across the back yard and into the thick woods that covered most of the western side of the Keep knoll. At this part of the Keep, everything was much quieter and more peaceful. The loudest noises were the chirruping of wildlife.

"Sometimes I wish the Elders would just make their move, already," Niro sighed, speaking only when the two men were deep in the woods, insulated by the trees. "Most of them support my ascension, but I know of a couple who might be motivated to take action against itâ€| Kavil, Hren, N'thaiâ€| It has been driving Surra out of her mind with worry. She does her best to conceal it from me, but I know her too well."

"I would caution you to be careful what you wish for," Uros warned his friend. "Fate is not a thing to be tempted."

Niro 'Ovarumee snorted. "_Bah,_ you are probably right. As usual. But enough about me and my plaguesâ€| How have you been faring, old friend?"

"Better," Uros admitted. "I have remained unpoisoned by alcohol for a full cycle, nowâ€|but her absence is still no less painful."

Uros's own wife had died three cycles ago of a rare genetic disease that the Prophets had yet to find a cure for. The Oenairem Elder had spent a cycle in a bottle of thax, and then another cycle recovering from his drunkenness after it nearly killed him. Though Uros had managed to at least _mostly_ let her go and move on, not a day went by that he did not feel her absence. Her death was another reason why Uros did not enjoy living in his empty Elder's estate in Oenairem Keep.

"I need something different," Uros sighed. "I need the routine to be brokenâ€| I do not know how many more nights I will be able to spend alone in my house. Perhaps I need another war."

"Now it is _you_ who should be careful what you wish for."

"That was idle speculation; not a true desire," Uros countered. He took a deep breath and regained his composure, clicking his mandibles once. "We should focus on your Induction. Noon will arrive on swift wingsâ€|"

* * *

><p>Ten menâ€|members of the Ovarum State Guardâ€|stood on either side of the aisle running through the center of the Assembly chamberâ€|five on each side. Each one of them held a long metal rod that crackled with electricity at the very tip. They stood so still they could easily have been mistaken as statues.<p>

The Ovarum Elders occupied the stands on the ground level, surrounding the circular speaker's platform in the centre of the chamber. The upper tier was filled with spectatorsâ€”families of the Elders and commoners, for the most part.

Standing on the speaker's platform was a wizened old manâ€”his skin gray and his back stooped with ageâ€”dressed in robes of silver and white. He was Neran 'Ihranro, an Oracle Master, and he would be overseeing the Induction.

"May the man who is to become the new Kaidon of Ovarum State show himself," the Oracle Master spoke the moment it was noon. A hush fell over the Assembly chamber.

Uros was sitting in the upper tier on the opposite side of the chamber of the entrance, so he was able to see his old friend walk into the chamber. Niro 'Ovarumee was clad only in a loincloth, revealing his sinewy muscles and battle scars. He strode into the chamber with his head held high, and answered the Oracle Master's summons.

"Name yourself," the Oracle Master ordered.

"I am Niro 'Ovarumee, son of Nhalek 'Tahamai, Zealot of the Covenant Navy, Servant of the Prophets," Niro replied.

"Recite your oath and prove your fortitude."

The oath itself was not all that special, as oaths of office went. It was the procedure that accompanied it that made it stand out.

Niro walked forward, stepping between the first pair of State Guardsmen. "I offer my life to my clan. I offer my blood to my people. I offer my service to my State."

With that, the first two State Guardsmenâ€”one on either sideâ€”hefted their electrified metal rods and jabbed them into Niro's back. The tips of the rods glowed bright and crackled loudly, and a faint smell of burning permeated throughout the chamber. Niro faltered and most of his muscles clenched up, but he kept his face expressionless.

The first two Guardsmen then withdrew their rods, allowing Niro to stumble forward.

The light brown-skinned man continued forward until he came to a stop between the second pair of State Guardsmen. He continued to recite his oath. "With my strength, I pledge service to my clan. With my mind, I would see my clan to victory. With my hands, I would see my enemies destroyed."

The second pair of Guardsmen pressed their spear-rods onto Niro's back even harder than their predecessors. Niro's mandibles twitched at the pain, but he still managed to remain firmly in control of himself, despite the pain. After a few seconds, the second pair of Guardsmen retracted their spears.

Niro's steps grew more shaky, but still he forged ahead until he reached the next two Guardsmen, halfway down the aisle. "With my

blood, I pledge service to my clan. My blood exists to be spilled alongside that of my brothers. May I never return home without leaving my mark on a battlefield."

The third pair of Guardsmen struck Niro with their electrified spears. The crackling was louder this time—the intensity was probably higher. Niro lost his balance for a moment, thrown off by the waves of pain tearing through his body, but he held himself together through sheer force of will. By the time the third pair of Guardsmen relented, sweat was pouring down his back, and he was beginning to pant.

Niro 'Ovarumee slowly made his way up to the penultimate pair of Guardsmen, moistening his mandibles before continuing his oath. "With my honor, I pledge service to my clan. It shall ward me from trickery and deceit. It shall grace my friends and foes alike. Those who show honor shall receive honor. My honor is my foundation; without it, I would be a shell, worthy of neither trust nor respect. With my honor, I would uphold my clan's dignity. I would uphold our right to existence."

The fourth pair of Guardsmen thrust their spears forward, striking Niro once more. This time, Niro was driven to his knees, and he grunted at the even higher intensity of the pain compared to the previous jolt.

Surra was sitting right next to Uros. The Oenairem Elder could sense her tensing up. He offered her his hand, which she clasped in a grip of steel.

Niro rose shakily to his feet. He took a single step and nearly collapsed, but he was able to keep his balance after a few seconds of concentration. He slid one foot in front of the other, forcing his way forward. Muscle spasms were visible all over his body, and his mandibles were clicking together uncontrollably.

After what felt like an eternity of trying to walk with phantom dropships tied to his legs, Niro found himself between the final pair of Guardsmen. They continued to stand stone-still at attention, ready to fulfill their part in the Induction.

"I—I surrender my name to—to my clan," Niro spoke in breathy pants, now, fighting against the urge to crumple to the floor and close his eyes for a long time. "May I lead my people—wisely—and have my name be venerated. If I should rule without honor, however—may—may my name become a curse, a symbol of weakness."

The final pair of Guardsmen struck Niro, driving him back to his knees. They kept him in pain far longer than any of their predecessors. And once they were finished, they quickly hefted their spears and jabbed them down a second time.

Niro's mandibles were splayed out wide as he gave a raw-throated, defiant roar, drowning out the sharp crackling of the electrified spears doing their grim work.

By the time the fifth pair of guards had finished, another State Guardsman had stepped onto the speaker's platform, bearing an ancient sword. The sword's twin curved blades were covered in

bloodstainsâ€"some were so old that they looked like rust, and others wereâ€"a little more recent. Niro would soon make the most recent addition.

The sword had once belonged to the Founder of Ovarum State, and it bore the blood of every Kaidon that had ruled in the State its previous master had created. The Oracle Master took the blade and turned back to Niro, who was on his hands and knees. He grasped the sword and pointed it down at Niro. "Add your essence to that of your ancestors. Offer your blood to their blade and join their legacy."

Niro looked up, quivering with exhaustion, and pushed himself up onto his knees. He grasped the blades of the ancient sword with both hands, gripping the sharp metal tightly. He then drew his hands down the length of the blade, leaving his own blood smeared on the edges of the stained metal. The last two Guardsmen produced bandages and proceeded to bind the resulting lacerations on Niro's palms.

The Oracle Master smiled. "Now be clothed, and rise as Niro 'Ovarumee, Kaidon."

Two more State Guardsmen appeared behind Niro and waited for him to struggle to his feet. When he did, they clothed him in yellow and orange robes, and draped a sun-shaped pendant emblazoned with the Ovarum crest around his neck.

Niro then stepped onto the speaker's platform as the new Kaidon. Cheering swept through the Assembly chamber as the spectators looked upon their new leader. The Elders celebrated, too, but they simply stood and clapped. It would not be dignifying for them to cheer like commoners.

Uros did not do much more than clap, himself. He was cheering in his mind, and that was enough. Following tradition, the Kaidon would be allowed a night's rest, and the great feast celebrating his ascension would happen the following evening. After spending half a unit or so in the Assembly chamber getting congratulated by the Elders and the commoners who had attended, Niro took his leave.

* * *

><p>Surra had bid her husband good night a short while ago and retired to their room for sleep. She would congratulate Niro properly on the morrow, when he was not about to drop dead from exhaustion.<p>

Despite his exhaustion, however, Niro sat in one of the chairs on his home's porch, inviting Uros to do likewise. Both men took pipes out from the folds of their robes. Neither of them smoked very often, usually saving their pipeweed for special occasionsâ€"both of them obviously considered this to be a somewhat special occasion.

Uros clamped his pipe in between his left mandibles. "This was not the first Induction I have attendedâ€"but I must say, I have never quite grown accustomed to watching them."

"In the old days, they used to use heated iron spears," Niro chuckled, exhaling a cross-shaped breath of smoke. "Though the pain that a heated iron spear would have delivered is nothing in the face

of what those shock-sticks dealt me. Though I suppose I am grateful that I will not have burns on my back for the rest of my days."

Uros took another puff from his pipe, releasing the smoke back into the air when he breathed out. The Prophets were the only other members of the Covenant who smoked, but they were fond of their fancy, flavored tobacco hookahs. Sangheili smoked much less often than their scientific and religious counterparts, and they preferred to use their own pipeweed.

"Though I may never grow accustomed to induction ceremonies, I confess I have grown rather fond of the feasts that follow them," the Oenairem Elder hummed. "With your wife's help, I suspect the feast tomorrow night will go down in history."

"Will you stay for it?"

Uros's chest rumbled with laughter. "Will I stay for the feast? The fact that you had to ask me is nearly offensive!"

Niro gave a soft chuckle as well. "Forgive me, old friend. In hindsight, I believe--"

The new Kaidon was suddenly interrupted by the sound of breaking glass and a thudding noise coming from upstairs. Niro froze, immediately falling silent. Uros stiffened as well—he had heard the sounds, too. Then Niro remembered that his wife was sleeping upstairs, and the thought sent a wave of adrenaline roaring through his body.

Uros followed his friend as the new Kaidon hurried into his house and up the stairs. When Niro kicked open the door, the new Kaidon had only a moment to take in the sight of his wife bleeding out on the floor before the blades of an energy sword came slicing towards his face.

Niro ducked the swipe. He rolled forward and swept the attacker's legs out from under him. The assassin fell to the ground with a grunt of pain. Niro was immediately on top of the attacker, pounding his wrist into the floor until he was forced to drop his energy sword.

The new Kaidon snatched the blade up before its failsafe could activate and plunged it into the assassin's chest. The attacker struggled at first, horrible gurgling noises coming from his mouth, but he finally lay still.

Unfortunately, the assassin hadn't been alone. There had been three of them total. While Niro killed the one by the door, the one wielding the dagger that had been used to stab Surra made for the broken window through which the assassins had gained entry to the room.

Uros leaped forward and grabbed the fleeing assassin by the ankle, tripping him up and causing him to crash to the floor. The man flipped around and struck at the Oenairem Elder. He actually managed to score a small hit—Uros had twisted away from the dagger thrust, but he hadn't been fast enough to avoid getting sliced.

By then, Niro had gotten back to his feet. He saw his friend

wrestling with the second assassin, and he quickly stepped over and sank the energy sword into the would-be killer's back. The man howled as the superheated plasma burned through his skin and organs, falling limp to the floor next to his deceased comrade.

The third assassin wielded an energy sword as well, and he let out a raw-throated yell and charged Niro. Uros moved to help, but Niro shoved him back. "His life is mine!" the Kaidon snarled.

The two opponents—"Kaidon and Assassin"—dueled each other for nearly a full minute. The third assassin was a much better fighter than his comrades, but even he was unable to defeat Niro in a swordfight. The Kaidon finally managed to get past his attacker's guard and landed a sharp kick on the assassin's knee, knocking him to the ground.

The Kaidon seized the assassin by the throat and raised his energy sword, ready to deliver the final blow, when Uros grabbed his wrist and stopped him at the last second. "Do not end him, yet!" the Oenaiem Elder shouted, struggling to restrain his old friend. "We need him alive! See to your wife!"

The mention of his wife was enough to bring the Kaidon back to reality. He deactivated the energy sword and let it fall to the floor. He could hear State Guardsmen not too far away, no doubt hurrying to investigate the sounds of fighting at the Kaidon's home, but he paid them no heed.

Surra lay on the floor next to the bed, a deep wound in her chest. The stab wound looked like it had pierced one of her lungs and ruptured a main artery, but it hadn't hit either of her hearts. Still—if she was not cared for, she would most definitely die.

By now, she had lost consciousness. Niro swore, tearing off a strip of her robes and applying pressure to the wound, trying to stop the blood flow.

Qom 'Rhalifee, the Marshal of the Ovarum State Guard, was personally leading the detachment of Guardsmen which was currently securing the Kaidon's home. The Marshal had had a suspicious feeling that an assassination attempt would be made tonight, and those suspicions were proving to be correct.

Upon bursting into the Kaidon's room, the Marshal took in the sight of the bleeding woman on the floor and motioned for two of his men to enter. "Move the Kaidon's wife to the landspeeder," he ordered. "With your permission, Kaidon, we will have her sent to a doctor."

Niro hesitated. "A doctor?" he murmured. It was considered dishonorable to see a doctor in many parts of Sanghelios. This was rooted in the ancient belief that the blood of a warrior is his essence, and to spill it would be to lose honor. Doctors were viewed as people who caused warriors to bleed without honor.

The Sangheili were slowly overcoming this superstition, but it would be a long time until they fully embraced medical science. But it was this deeply-rooted belief which made the Kaidon hesitate when he was informed his wife would have to see a doctor.

What the Kaidon's ultimate decision would have been, no one could

say, for Uros grasped his old friend by the arms and warned, "If you do not do everything in your power to save Surra's life, you will never sleep again. Send her to the doctor."

If Niro had been teetering on his decision, his old friend's warning was enough for him to make up his mind. He gave the Marshal a nod. 'Take her," he ordered.

Two State Guardsmen gently lifted Surra from the floor and carried her from the room.

Niro watched her go. A cold rage erupted in the pits of his hearts. An attack on his own life, he would have been okay with. He had been expecting it, after all. But when it was his _wife_ who ended up taking the knife intended for him—the Kaidon had to struggle to keep his rage in check.

When he spoke, his voice was surprisingly calm and reasonable—but Uros could sense the burning anger simmering just barely beneath the surface. And so, the Oenairem Elder was sure, could the third assassin.

"You were not the one who attacked an unarmed woman," Niro hissed, crouching over the third assassin, who was now being restrained by another two State Guardsmen. "You fought me with honor rather than turning tail and attempting to flee. Those who show honor shall receive honor; I will grant you safe passage from my home if you tell me which of the Elders is responsible for your deeds. I will not offer you this twice, so choose your next words _very_ carefully."

The assassin hesitated at first. Normally a Kaidon would execute him either way, but the assassin could tell that Niro 'Ovarumee was being fueled by a terrible rage, and this seemed to be driving him to do things considered abnormal. The assassin could sense that the Kaidon was willing to do nearly anything in order to find who was responsible for his wife getting stabbed—and if that involved turning loose an assassin, so be it.

And so, the assassin decided to take the lifeline. "It was Kavil," was all the assassin said in reply. "We were sent by the Elder Kavil."

Niro gave a single nod. Kavil 'Ovarum had been one of the Elders whom the Kaidon had suspected would make an attempt on his life. Niro had never liked the man—he'd often twisted the truth to serve his agendas, and he'd never had the bravery to serve in the military. Well, the dislike had just grown into full-blown hatred.

"Gather your men outside, Marshal," the Kaidon said to Qom 'Rhalifee. "We are going to pay Elder Kavil a visit. As for you—" Niro turned back to the assassin. "If you are seen on my island past dusk tomorrow, I can assure you that your fate will not be a pleasant one. Now get out of my sight."

Uros and Niro hadn't even bothered to put on their armor. They had simply grabbed their energy blades before joining 'Rhalifee's force of State Guardsmen. The angry Kaidon led the way across Ovarum Keep to the estate of Kavil 'Ovarum. As they passed by the numerous other households of the Keep, windows were closed and doors were locked.

The residents of the Keep were able to quickly piece together what had happened—and once they did that, they knew what the Kaidon was about to do.

Kavil 'Ovarum's estate was very quiet. As Niro led the Marshal and his State Guardsmen across the front lawn, there was no challenge. No one even seemed to rouse within the household.

When the Kaidon drew his energy blade and kicked down the door all he was greeted with was a cold silence.

The State Guardsmen filed into the house and performed a quick search, but Niro already knew that they would not find the wayward Elder. Kavil 'Ovarum's estate was completely empty.

"He has fled," the Kaidon hissed, his mandibles quivering with his anger. He took another deep breath and turned back around to face the Marshal of the Guard. "I want you to educate all of the State Guard across the island of Kavil 'Ovarum's malefactions. The man acts like vermin, so he shall be hunted down like vermin."

Qom 'Rhalifee clasped his right fist to his left heart and bowed his head in a salute to his superior. "As you command, Kaidon."

"I will see his lineage extinguished for this!" Niro murmured to his friend after the State Guardsmen left.

"That is your right," Uros agreed, although the Oenairem Elder felt this was Niro's anger talking—not the Kaidon himself. Uros decided that Niro needed to rest and recover. He needed to give his anger a chance to cool. Men driven by anger were prone to great folly.

Before Uros could suggest they leave, however, both men heard a muffled, high-pitched cry coming from somewhere below their feet. The house, as they had once thought, did not appear to be empty.

"Perhaps he cowers in the basement," Niro surmised, activating his energy sword. The twin blades of plasma energy snapped into existence as the Kaidon strode through the household to the stairs that led down into the cellar.

Niro headed down the steps, aware of the sound of someone sniffing in the darkness. Because of that darkness, however, he could not see what was causing it. "Show yourself, coward!" he shouted into the darkness.

Uros decided to take one of the flickering plasma lamps off of the wall before following his old friend. Just as the Kaidon was shouting at the darkness, Uros headed down the stairs and into the cellar, lighting the darkness with the plasma lamp.

Niro saw the source of the noise on the floor on the opposite side of the cellar, and his anger quickly began to drain away. Lying on the cold, hard stone floor was a dark brown-skinned infant, still half-asleep despite the commotion caused by the Kaidon not ten seconds ago.

Uros set the lamp on the floor and hurried over to the infant,

picking it up off of the cold floor and holding it in his arms. Upon closer inspection, Uros determined that it was a boy. As he gathered the child into his arms, the infant was woken up by the movement, and he opened his eyes.

Uros stared into the child's deep maroon eyes, and a small lump formed in his throat. His wife's eyes had been the same color.

"Put the boy down, Uros," Niro 'Ovarumee raised his plasma blade. "You know as well as I what needs to be done."

"Why must the child die for the sins of his father?" Uros protested. "Kavil's family does not have dark skin, either; this boy must be a Swordsman's child. He shares no blood with the former Elder."

"He is still a member of Kavil's lineage," Niro reaffirmed adamantly. "His life is mine."

"Kavil and his ilk abandoned him," Uros still refused to budge. "They ran for their own lives and left a newborn here to die; any claim they may have had on this child, they severed with their cowardice. I am sorry, but I will not give you the boy's life."

"What would you have me do, then?" Niro snapped, keeping his sword level. "Consider what sort of life he would have. He would be a pariah. Dishonored by my mercy and a member of a tainted lineage. No one would want anything to do with him. Better he was never bornâ€¦"

Uros was silent for a short period of time, deep in thought. His old friend made a valid point, butâ€¦ The Oenairem Elder had seen enough death, tonight. "Then send him out of your State. He can grow up far away from here, far away from place of his family's dishonor. He can shed his old family and take a new name. He can begin anew."

"And who exactly do you think would take someone like this in? No one would take an unknown child without asking questions, especially in this day and age," Niro sighed, lowering his sword and finally deactivating it, slipping it into his belt. When all he got in response from his old friend was a raised brow callus, he finally saw what Uros was driving at. "_You_ would do this?"

"My home was once a lively placeâ€¦now it is cold and empty," Uros said quietly, hoisting the infant up so that its head rested on his shoulder. "Perhaps I can make it a home once more."

"Very wellâ€¦" Niro gave a single nod. "I revoke this child's name, as you are my witness. The boy's blood is now your blood. I hope you know what you are doingâ€¦ I am sorry, Uros, but I am afraid you must leave, now."

"Indeed," Uros grunted in agreement, heading back up the stairs. "The sight of me with an infant would no doubt provoke the asking of questions which would best be left unanswered."

"Or, better yet; _unasked,_" Niro corrected, closing the door to the basement and following his old friend outside. The two men stood outside the house of the Elder who had caused them so much grief. Niro extended his hand. "I pray tonight's events have not poisoned our friendship."

"Your wife was nearly killed, old friend," Uros clasped Niro's hand and shook it before stepping away. "A surge of your temper is hardly an unforgivable offense. Do give my regards to Surraâ€|next time I visit your home, I pray I will be able to enjoy one of her dinners in peace."

The two friends exchanged swift goodbyes and went their separate ways.

The youngling had thankfully fallen back asleep, slumped against the Oenairem Elder's shoulder, breathing heavily down his back. Uros silently made his way back to his landspeeder in the Keep's garage.

Everything after the Induction had just happened so fastâ€|when Uros tried to think about it, all he could really think of was a huge blur. Things had definitely _not_ turned out the way Uros had expected them to.

Who would have imagined that when he departed from his home that he would end up returning with a youngling? It had been a spur of the moment decision for Uros. It had been spur of the moment decisionâ€|but it had _not_ been difficult decision; had the youngling not been claimed by the Oenairem Elder, Niro would have killed him. It was as simple as that.

As he climbed into his landspeeder, Uros lay the infant in the small storage compartment, wrapping him in the blanket that he usually covered the seat with. He, at least, would be comfortable for the journey.

During his walk back to the garage, Uros had thought deeply on what the child's name should be. Ultimately, there had been one name that had kept on coming back to him: _Fated_. After it entered his thoughts several times, Uros decided it would be a fitting name for the newest addition to his clan.

Uros scratched under the infant's mandibles affectionately as he started the engine of his landspeeder.

"Welcome to life, Aten."

* * *

><p>Author's Note**

Well, uh...let's give the Elites a try, shall we?

__TheAmateur__

2. I Chapter 2: Proselyte

Section I: Fervor

* * *

><p>Chapter Two: Proselyte

9**th**** Age of Reclamation, 13****th**** Cycle
>Sanghelios, Urs Prime System

Aten

The sword is not your tool.

My winter clothing weighed heavy on my body. It had to be heavy in order to ward off the cold of the mountains, but it weighed me down somewhatâ€”made my movements less smooth, less precise. The white and gray patterns on the outer waterproof layer of cloth, however, allowed me to blend into the snowy environment of this forest made white by Nature.

It also prevented me from freezing to death, I supposeâ€”| Though keeping me from freezing to death and keeping me warm were two separate things; my clothing kept me alive, but not comfortable.

The sword is not your weapon.

To be truthful, I could barely feel the cold.

Almost from the day I could stand, I had been trained to fight. My Guardian never seemed to harbor any desire for me to join a warrior's crÃ”cheâ€”| yet he had always pushed and trained me to the brink of exhaustion six days out of every seven. Every seventh day was a day of rest, during which my Guardian taught me the moreâ€”| passive aspects of the warrior's path.

A little cold weather was not the most painful thing I have endured.

You and the sword are one.

Even now, his words still echoed in my mind. Spoken to me time after time as he battered me and broke me under his wooden training stave. Words of advice, words of wisdom, words of philosophy, words of experienceâ€”| My Guardian always had something to talk about while he bloodied me up.

I am a Proselyte. Most of us who don't follow the path of the warrior become farmers, blacksmiths, craftsmen, or grow up to follow some other trade. Those of us who _do_ aspire to wear the blue armor of a Minor in the Covenant Army, however, had to first be recognized as Proselytes by our Kaidon. I had achieved this five cycles ago, when I was thirteen, by participating in a gladiator-like tournament against dozens of other younglings roughly my age.

I had not won the tournament. I do not think I was even exceptional when it came to my swordplay. But skill with the sword was not the only way to earn the blessing of one's Kaidon. You had to earn the Kaidon's respect to become a Proselyte, and that was exactly what I did.

My bigger, faster, stronger peers beat me within an inch of my life. I left the trials with over half the bones in my body broken, a fractured mandible, and mild internal bleeding. Do not mistake me; I defeated many opponents during the trials, but the most skilled

swordsmen of the bunch were vicious fighters. What gained me the title of Proselyte was the fact that I never once accepted defeat. Every time I was knocked down, I would climb right back up to my feet. I would bloody up my opponent some more, get knocked back down, and repeat the process until the drillmasters halted the round.

In a way, although I did not win these fights, I did not lose them, either.

"_Your opponents have superior hands and feet,_" the Kaidon had said to me during the judging, after the trials had concluded, when he would select who from his state was worthy to become a Proselyte and who would have to try again. "_Yet you have proven yourself to have the heart of a warrior. Had the trials been a true battle against the Humans, I am sure you would have fought to the death._"

I had earned his respect, and therefore, his blessing. Which was why, five cycles later, I found myself silently crawling and plodding through a snow-covered forest up in the Lhetae Mountains, which formed the State of Oenairem's the northern border. Not too far away from my current location was a small village populated mostly with trappers and loggers. A sabretooth snow manx had apparently killed three children from that village this past month. An impromptu hunting party had then been sent out to kill the beast, and half of them had returned badly mauled—they had not been prepared for such a hunt, and especially not in the dead of winter.

Last week, I had been summoned to Oenairem Keep. Normally, Proselytes would have to individually undergo their own set of trials at the Keep, observed by veterans from the warrior crÃches. The Kaidon had other plans for me. He told me that he was not going to 'waste my time by having me show off to the veterans with children's sticks'. He told me of this village's snow manx problem and ordered me not to return without the creature's pelt.

"_It will take more than skill with a sword to stand toe-to-toe with one of Nature's deadliest sons,_" the Kaidon had said to me. "_A true warrior fights with his heart and his wits. Trust your heart, Aten. And use your wits._"

And so, when I arrived at the mountain settlement, I had been invited to meet the village's elected Ret, or headman. The village Ret informed me that the Kaidon had instructed him to provide me only with food and non-combat-related supplies. They were not allowed to give me shelter, weapons, or medical aid—though I would not have accepted medical aid, even if it had been offered.

In a nutshell, I spent a single night in the village, loaded up on bare food supplies to keep me from starving in the woods, and set a small trap of sorts. Later, the trap had been sprung by the snow manx, so I set out into the woods in pursuit.

So if you wondered why I was in the middle of a snow-covered forest armed with only a small hunting knife and a spade—there is your answer. There were many things—actions, decisions, victories, beatings, bruises, wounds—that had all come together, now; all of my training with my Guardian had been leading up to this very point.

My final act as a Proselyte. Kill a giant, bloodthirsty sabretooth

snow manx with my wits and my warrior's heart.

I would not have it any other way.

The weather favored me, today. The breeze was minimal, so I could still see the tracks left by the snow manx, along with an accompanying trail of small crimson stains.

An elderly orchard keeper from the village named Etam 'Lhusav had agreed to give me one of his pet madras to use for bait. The madra he had given me was old and very sick—it had not been expected to live into next week. I had drugged it into sleep and placed it at the grove where the village's three dead children had been snatched. Before dawn, I'd heard a disturbance in that grove, and when I'd gone to investigate, sure enough, the madra was gone. All that was left were its tracks—and that trail of small crimson stains—the unfortunate madra's blood.

I have been following the twin sets of tracks—blood and pawprint—for several hours, now. This snow manx was smart—its home was far enough from the village for it to eat and rest without having to worry about dealing with unwanted Sangheili guests. Unless, of course, a Sangheili arrived with the sole intent of bringing its pelt to his Kaidon. Indeed, I was about to complicate the beast's simple life.

I followed these tracks throughout the rest of the morning. It wasn't until sometime after midday that I finally found the snow manx's home. There was a large, ridge-like rock formation that loomed over this part of the forest. The snow manx appeared to reside in a cave at the base of the cliff face.

I flattened myself to the snow-covered ground and slithered forward. I reached the top of the incline I was on. My vantage point allowed me to overlook the gully in front of the cliff face, as well as the dark entrance to the snow manx's cave.

My breath caught in my throat when I saw the beast itself. It was a magnificent creature. Smooth, pure white fur blowing ever so slightly in the gentle breeze. Two long, curved fangs glinting in the sunlight. A mouth stained red with madra blood.

The remains of the madra I had used as bait were splayed out in front of the cave entrance. The manx was still feasting on the poor old beast. I was comforted by the fact that I had at least made sure the madra was unconscious throughout the entire ordeal. I would have sacrificed dozens of madra to gain a position in the Covenant Army, but still—easing its passing was my way of saying _thank-you_.

It was time to get to work.

As the suns made their way into the west, I worked myself to the brink of—_past_ the brink of—exhaustion. There were plenty of fallen branches around this area, which was good because I needed those branches for my plan. Had they not been around this area, I would have been required to forage deeper into the mountains to find what I needed.

I gathered around five or six of these large branches. I took three of them and broke them in half so that they were roughly the size of

the wooden training staves most Proselytes honed their swordsmanship with.

I then set about digging a moderately deep holeâ€”not very long or wide; just a little bit deep. I accomplished this with the small spade I had been carrying on my back since dawn. While the Kaidon had forbidden the village from providing me with weapons, he had said nothing about common tools.

I would not use the tools as weapons, though. That would be overstepping my boundaries.

It was nighttime by the time I finished digging my hole, but I did not sleep. I crawled into the hole, where it would be easier to keep warm, and started whittling down the jagged tips of the broken branches. It was not hard work, but it was very time consuming. It took me most of the night to sharpen the six snapped branches into pointed stakes.

I had no light source, other than the faint, silver light of the crescent moons, so after I finished making the six stakes, there was not much else I could really do. I needed to plant the stakes in the base of the hole, but I did not want to do that until I was out of the holeâ€”and I would not be leaving the hole until daybreak, when I could see everything clearly.

I passed the time by carving absent-mindedly away at one of the three remaining branches. Once or twice, I could have sworn I'd heard movement out there in the darkness, but when I peeked over the edge of the hole, I saw nothing but a hibernating forest.

When Urs, Joori, and Fiedâ€”our three sunsâ€”began to show themselves, I resumed my work. I used the spade to dig six narrow shafts into the bottom of the hole. A pointed stake went into each of these new shaftsâ€”sharp end pointing up, obviously. Once they were planted, I filled the shafts in around them with the recently shoveled dirt, packing it in firmly, making sure the stakes were firmly fixed.

The branch I'd been whittling all night had been sharpened too far for it to be used as an effective stakeâ€”breaking it in half would make the sharp end too small, and I had no time to whittle an entirely new stake, so I just had to cast that branch aside.

This was the part where I had to hurry. It was past dawn, now, nearing sunrise. Normally, this would be the time when wildlife would crawl from their homes to begin their dayâ€”they did not do so now, obviously, because it was in the middle of winter. I had to hurry because I knew that if the snow manx was following its schedule, it would be prowling the woods around the village right about now. Soon, it would start heading back.

I had to be ready before it arrived, otherwise it might sense me and attack me before I was sufficiently prepared to take it down. I suppose I was lucky it did not catch my scent during the nightâ€”perhaps I did not think this all the way through. But at this point, I was not going to beat myself up over something that could have happened, but ultimately did not happen.

Of my six branches, three had been halved and converted into stakes,

and a fourth had been whittled beyond viable use, which left me with two. At first I thought that this would not be enough, but I soon saw that this was actually a rather perfect amount. I crawled out of the newly-made spike pit and lay the two branches on the ground across the surface of the hole, side by side.

I then hurried back off into the woods and gathered an armful of much smaller, thinner branches. Sticks, basically. These sticks were placed around and on top of the rim of the hole and the two larger branches, forming an effective lattice. With a rough lattice in place, I filled the larger gaps with twigs so that the snow I was about to cover it with would not fall through.

It was already sunrise by the time I got to the final stage of finishing my little manx trap. I could not actually see the sunrise because of the mountains, but I could see the dark, navy blue, early morning sky shot through with streaks of amber and red-orange that heralded the suns' rise. The snow manx was no doubt on its way back here at this very moment.

The last stage of completing the trap was simply gathering snow and covering up the hole. The lattice of branches, sticks, and twigs kept the snow from falling into the pit, which would have ruined the trap. Had it been any other time of year, or if there hadn't been enough snow, or if the snow had been the powdery sort, I could have used earth and leaves to the same effect—but covering it with snow was much easier.

The snow out here wasn't all that deep—just a few inches—so I did not need to go overboard with the concealment. I just dumped it on and smoothed it over. As a finishing touch, I placed two of my smaller leftover sticks on top of the concealed trap, making them form a small ****X****. I did not want to accidentally fall into my own pit, nor did I want the manx to miss the trap because I had forgotten where it lay—that would have been embarrassing. Potentially fatal, as well—but mostly embarrassing.

The suns peeked over the slopes of the mountains to my east, finally bathing the area in sunlight. I took a moment to close my eyes and relax, basking in the morning sunlight. For that short amount of time, the loudest noise was the sound of my own hearts beating. The forest was silent. I'm sure a place like this would be like Aether to the Ascetics. Those old priests would love the silence.

But I was no Ascetic, and I was not here to relax. I had to be constantly on my guard. The only reason I was the hunter and the snow manx was the hunted was because the beast did not know of my presence. But the moment it sensed me, our roles would reverse. I would become the hunted. This was part of my plan, obviously. But if I was caught off my guard, I would become something else entirely: prey.

And possibly dinner.

There were two giant trees not far away from the hidden trap that were close enough to the gully for me to see both my trap and the snow manx's home. I lay back down on my stomach once more, discarding the sharpened tree limb, and waited.

I do not know how long I lay there waiting for my quarry. Well into

the afternoon, no doubt; the snow manx must have been taking a bit of a detour. I helped myself to a square of grahla jerkyâ€"courtesy of the villagers. After all, I had not eaten for over a day, now. Twenty-four units without food was a long stretch.

The square of jerky did not do much to stave off my hunger. In fact, I believe it simply reminded me just how hungry I was. Stillâ€¦ I suppose it was good just to have something in my system, even if it made me feel hungrier. Energy was energy.

I am proud to say that despite my discomfort, I did not lose patience, not even for a moment. I lay still as the trees and bushes around me, making no noise save for my own breathing. And I did not complain once, though I did come close to doing so many times. My patience paid off when I saw movement in the corner of my eye.

I did not turn my head to look. I kept track of the movement with my peripheral vision until I was able to see it properly. Sure enough, my friend the snow manx was back. Luckily, it did not seem to have eaten any of the village folkâ€"the blood dripping from its mouth was not that of a Sangheili. It must have had a meal that was not worth dragging back home, which would explain its delay.

Now was my chance to get its attention, before it slunk away into its cave. I really did not want to have to draw it out of its cave if I could help itâ€¦

Getting the beast's attention turned out to be one of the easiest tasks I have accomplished out here, so far. All it took was a single rock.

I did not hit the beastâ€"it was too far away for that. But the rock striking the ground was enough for the snow manx to catch sight of me. It gave a low, rumbling growl, baring its fangs. The first thing I did when it saw me was to run.

This was not an act of cowardice. This was just me exploiting the snow manx's chase reflexâ€"once it turned to see potential prey running awayâ€¦well, it simply was not the kind of creature to let a meal on legs throw a rock at it and then stroll away unscathed.

I sprinted faster than I've ever sprinted before. Within moments, the white-furred beast had reached the two large trees which I had been resting on. It was nearly breathing down my neck. Just watching it run, I was able to see how it had so easily handled the group of village folk who had tried unsuccessfully to hunt it down.

Looking back on it, I really don't know how I was able to make it past my trap before the snow manx could separate me from one or more of my limbs; the whole thing was just an adrenaline-soaked blur. Not that it really mattered, thoughâ€¦and you are about to see why.

My trap worked too well. Even putting a small portion of one's body weight on the lattice of sticks would be enough for it to giveâ€"it was very sensitive. When the snow manx reached the trap, it was stepping forward on its front paws. There was a loud snapping, crashing sound as the trap gave way, and a triumphant rush of relief came over me. I slowed down, expecting to hear the beast's howls of painâ€¦only to see the snow manx leaping over the now-revealed spike pit, claws glinting in the sunlight, front paws outstretched.

Though its front paws had broken the top of the trap, its feet had landed on solid ground just shy of the pit. Before it could tumble down onto the stakes, the snow manx used its powerful hind legs to propel it across the gap with an almighty leap. I'm sure the snow manx had just experienced an adrenaline burst of its own.

I did not even have time to swear. A lifetime of avoiding my Guardian's well-aimed strikes with a practice sword suddenly kicked in. Even before the snow manx could land, I was already diving out of its way, tucking into a tight roll, and landing back on my feet.

My mind was racing at the speed of light, now. Though I did not have time to swear as the manx nearly brained me, I was cursing myself out on the inside. How stupid I had been, placing all my trust in a single plan. What if that plan had failed? What would I do then?

Those were two very good, very important questions that I had never asked myself, and I was suffering the consequences. I now had an angry predator within limb-ripping distance, and nothing to fight it with except for a measly little knife—and perhaps something else. An idea appeared in my mind like a plasma torch lighting up a dark cavern. Everything seemed to be moving so fast, but there was one thing that stood out from everything else: the pair of giant trees that I had been resting against.

I was already running back to those trees, ignoring the protests from my leg muscles as I ran at speeds beyond my normal endurance level. I nearly stumbled once, but I recovered almost as soon as my balance wavered. Had I actually stumbled, I never would have left that forest alive.

The fourth branch, the one I had whittled beyond use for the trap, was still lying in the snow where I had dropped it. I managed to scoop it up before I was forced to dive to the side once again by the snow manx when it tried to pounce me.

As I had planned, the sharpened branch could be used as a spear. But now the snow manx was between me and those two trees—and I needed those trees. My mind processed the situation, and I knew that my predicament was not a favorable one. I could not hope to run around or away from the creature—it was simply too fast—so I settled for a more unconventional solution. Once it leaped at me again, I made my move.

Instead of backing away, I think I surprised the snow manx when I stepped forward. I did not give it time to ponder why I would commit such a foolish act, however; as I stepped forward, I inverted the makeshift spear and brought its thick base crashing into the side of the snow manx's head, throwing it off-balance.

The snow manx howled at the sudden pain as it landed well to the side of me, its intended prey. It whipped back around, teeth and claws bared. Before, it had simply been chasing me to earn a meal, but now—it was angry.

But again, I did not stop and watch its reaction. When I stepped forward and delivered the blow to its head, I kept right on going and broke out into another sprint. By the time the snow manx had whipped

around and resumed its pursuit, I had reached the trees. I threw a glance over my shoulder and saw the white creature bounding after me, thirsting for blood.

The problem with using a spear against the snow manx was that it could simply smack away or even snap the branch without very much effort. And even so, achieving a killing thrust with a sharpened branch would be very difficult on the first try with a creature like thisâ€”and if I failed to kill it with the first blow, I would then be defenseless.

Better to make the snow manx do all of the work for meâ€” And now that I had angered the creature, it seemed to be chasing me with even less caution than before, despite its near-death as a result of my spike pit. I had to make sure the snow manx would pounce meâ€”and also that it would not be able to twist away and attack me from the side.

And so, I backed up between the two trees and waited on the other side. Just as I had planned, the snow manx stormed right up after me. It pounced right through the two trees, claws ready to slice me to ribbons.

I swiftly spun around to face the predator. The moment it leaped into the air, I planted the base of my makeshift spear firmly onto the ground and leveled the point at the pouncing manx. The creature must have sensed its mistake, but it had pounced through the two treesâ€”there was nowhere else for it to turn. It landed on my spear with a sickening noise that I will not describe.

As the fatally wounded creature started howling in agony, I pulled out my knife and granted the beast a quick, merciful escape from its pain. "I am sorry, brother," I murmured to the deceased snow manx in apology, wiping my knife off before sheathing it. "But I am not here for you to eat. And neither were those village folk."

I allowed myself a short rest. After all, I had burned a lot of my energy running from the beast; I needed to recover some of that energy before I could proceed. I ate several more squares of grahla jerky, had a quick sip of water, and waited for my breathing and heart rate to go back down.

I rose to my feet when I was sufficiently rested. I had resolved not to spend another night out in these woods. I probably would not reach the village by nightfall, but I was not going to stop, even if it took me all night. I crouched down in front of the dead snow manx and threw its front legs over my shoulders, supporting the creature's head, shoulders, and upper torso on my back. Its hind legs trailed behind me in the snow as I started moving forward.

I staggered at first under the weight of the white beast, but quickly regained my balance and fell into a steady, rhythmic pace. My people were not a race of weaklingsâ€”but this beast was pretty heavy, as snow manxes usually go.

I took a deep breath as I set off, pausing momentarily to adjust my hold on the snow manx's body. This was going to be a long walkâ€”

3. I Chapter 3: Homeward Bound

Chapter Three: Homeward Bound

****9****th****** Age of Reclamation, 13********th****** Cycle
>Sanghelios, Urs Prime System

****One Week Ago****_

****Niro****_

"Establishing our exit vector," Eyom 'Nelasee, the ship's helmsman, reported. The thin, wiry man clicked his mandibles nonchalantly as he input the appropriate commands into his console. "Returning to normal space in fifteen seconds."

The bridge crew of the _Sacrosanct_ glanced frequently at the blank viewscreen. In the Nether, there was no visible light for a ship's optics to pick up. As a consequence, whenever a ship was making a nether jump, the sensors were, for all intents and purposes, dead. The viewscreens would not function again until the ship returned to three-dimensional space.

The Shipmaster sat in the command chair, silent as his crew made preparations for the return to normal space. He, too, kept a close eye on the dark viewscreen. It had been over three cycles since he had seen home. He missed the salty breeze and balmy weather of his State. He missed the warmth of his wife's touch. And, perhaps most of all, he missed her cooking. The Shipmaster had discovered, to his great surprise, that several of his Unggoy subordinates made decent chefs. However, their cooking still could not compare to that of a Sangheili wife.

The helmsman informed the Shipmaster that the return to normal space was imminent.

That strange, omnipresent rushing noise that accompanied jumps into and out of the Nether reverberated around and throughout the battlecruiser. Then, silence reigned supreme, once more.

"Give us a visual, Ops," Uilar 'Tahamee, the second-master of the _Sacrosanct_, ordered. "I have grown weary of staring at a blank screen."

"It is done," Sesa 'Yeromee, the operations officer, declared once he had completed rebooting the ship's external sensors.

The viewscreen flickered several times, and then finally resolved into an image of a mottled green, yellow, and blue orb, with overlaying wisps of white. It filled well over half the screen, and was getting larger by the second. The bridge crew fell silent as they gazed upon the world below them.

"Homeâ€|" the second-master said. "There lies a sight for sore eyes."

The only bridge officer who was not from Sanghelios was R'lyes 'Suruinee, the weapons officer who was currently manning the tactical station. 'Suruinee was from Rapture, an ancient colony world that predated the birth of the Covenant. Despite this, however, he still

had just as much reverence for the homeworld as everyone else.

"Shipmaster," Ni'ram 'Teharolee, the communications officer—who also doubled as operations officer whenever 'Yeromee was off-duty—spoke up. "We are being hailed by Docking Array Twelve. They are requesting clearance codes."

The Shipmaster bit back an irritated click of the mandibles. It was standard procedure for a station to request clearance codes before docking, but sometimes the formalities just got—well, they could get irritating. They needed the codes to be sure the Shipmaster was who he said he was. The only way that would not be the case, though, was if the Sacrosanct had been somehow captured by Humans.

And that notion was laughable, at best.

But procedure was procedure.

The Shipmaster brushed a finger across the touch-sensitive node set into the arm of his command chair. A series of holographic displays sprang to life out of the node, shimmering in the air in front of the Shipmaster like a console made out of light. From that command display, the Shipmaster could effectively take personal control of all of the ship's systems. He would never do this, obviously, unless one of the bridge stations was rendered inoperable during a fight.

The Shipmaster accessed the Sacrosanct's long-range comm system and transmitted the clearance codes required by the docking array. With that completed, the communications officer then reported that Array Twelve had cleared the Sacrosanct for docking.

Docking Array Twelve was one of many refit and repair stations orbiting Sanghelios. Normally a ship, when damaged, would report for repairs at one of the myriad refit-battle stations scattered all throughout the Covenant Empire. After the Sacrosanct had been badly damaged in a recent fight against the Human navy, the commanding Fleetmaster had granted the crew of the Sacrosanct leave on the homeworld.

The Sacrosanct's complement of Huragok had actually managed to repair the worst of the damage. It would take a week's worth of repairs at this docking station to get the battlecruiser back in peak condition. During that short interim, the Shipmaster would allow his officers to visit their home States, and the crewmen would be given shore leave at a military base in the South of Maeron—it was near the equator of Sanghelios, giving it a permanent balmy climate, no matter what time of the year it was.

The Shipmaster also made it a point to grant the Unggoy crewmen shore leave as well. This was not done out of any particular sympathy for the lowest species of the Covenant; rather, it was simply common sense. If a Shipmaster never allowed his Unggoy crewmen a reprieve, their work would get sloppier and sloppier. Routines could be neglected. Errors could be made. Fatal errors.

The only ones who would probably never need some form of respite from the war—besides the Huragok, that is—were the Sacrosanct's pair

of Mgalekgolo bond brothers. Their names were Uredi Aido Nissu and Erano Aido Vana, and they were responsible for the Shipmaster's safety. This mostly applied to mutinyâ€”which was extremely rare. While one could say that the bond brothers' duties were pointless because mutinies rarely ever happened, it could also be argued that their mere presence on a vessel was the _reason_ why mutinies were so uncommon.

The Shipmaster had 'Nelasee switch to maneuvering thrusters in order to ease the battlecruiser into port. There were five other vessels docked at Array Twelve. Three of them looked like they were receiving finishing touches, a fourth was about as damaged as the _Sacrosanct_, and a fifth looked like a gutted sea creature.

Once the _Sacrosanct_ had successfully docked, the second-masterâ€”at the Shipmaster's requestâ€”got onto the shipwide comm and ordered the crew to the airlocks. They could board Array Twelve and take a transport down to Sanghelios from there.

The Shipmaster longed to depart for home, but he accompanied his men onto Array Twelve. It would not be proper for him to depart without following his men to the base in the South of Maeron.

The Huragok remained aboard to assist with the repairs. They did not mind being left behind in the slightestâ€”all they seemed to care about was fixing things. As long as there were broken components that needed repair, they would be happy little gas-bags. And the _Sacrosanct_ had plenty that needed to be repaired.

Besides the core group of officers that commanded the battlecruiser, the Unggoy workers, and the Huragok technicians, the rest of the _Sacrosanct's_ crew comprised of a small detachment of Spec Ops forces, as well as a portion of the Q'Rumno Warrior Creche. There were more members of the warrior crÃ”che onboard at this time becauseâ€”due to recent losses in battle, and also due to veteran members joining combat legionsâ€”the Q'Rumno was in need of fresh recruits. And there were always plenty of fresh recruits on the homeworld.

Once they were on the surface, they would send out warriors to various states who requested their presence in order to recruit worthy Proselytes into their ranks.

The Shipmaster briefly met with Array Twelve's dockmaster, exchanging greetings and thanks. After the dockmaster assured him that the _Sacrosanct_ was in good hands, the Shipmaster boarded a transport to the South of Maeron.

Sanghelios had nine major continents, of which Maeron was the third-smallest. It sat just north of the equator, so the southern coast enjoyed a tropical climate. The crew of the _Sacrosanct_ would not be able to complain about the weather.

But the Shipmaster was headed elsewhere. After reaching the naval base in the South of Maeron, the Shipmaster made sure his men were squared away before boarding a Type-25 Troop Carrier dropshipâ€”called a _Spirit_ by the common rank and fileâ€”that was bound for the State of Inzaunum. Inzaunum was located on the northwestern coast of Yermoâ€”the largest continent of the nine. Just across a strait of four or five miles lay the island-State of Ovarum,

which was the Shipmaster's destination. There had been no transports heading directly to Ovarum, however, so the Shipmaster had to make do with the next best thing.

The Shipmaster was then able to acquire passage across the Straits from one of the fishermen down at the docks. Upon recognizing the zealot as his Kaidon, the fisherman was honored to ferry the Shipmaster back home.

Luckily, it was still early afternoon in this area, and the wind was on their side. The fisherman was able to get the Shipmaster to the capital city of Rhei before nightfall with time to spare.

The fisherman and the Shipmaster parted ways afterwards. Though the fisherman refused any kind of payment, the Shipmaster furtively left a good sum of credits in the cabin of the seaman's boat. The Shipmaster then walked into his city, taking pleasure in the familiar sight of old and new technology standing side by side, traditional and modern lifestyles coexisting in a strange balance, the salty breeze that always came off the straits at this time of day.

Though the Shipmaster was willing to give up his life at a moment's notice, he had to admit that he had sorely missed this place. He was glad that his time had not yet come.

Not all of the city's inhabitants recognized the Shipmaster—after all, he had been off-planet fighting the Humans for many years, now. But even those who didn't recognize the Shipmaster stared at him as he passed, bowing respectfully. The golden armor he wore and the energy sword that hung from his waist were more than enough to command their respect.

The Shipmaster steadily made his way through the thick of his city until he finally reached the high knoll in the city's centre, which formed Ovarum Keep. He passed through the entrance gates with no problem—the State Guardsmen all recognized him, and they bowed extra-low. "We are humbled by your return, Kaidon," the more senior of the Guardsmen at the gate said as he bowed.

"Do not humble yourselves too much," the Shipmaster sighed. "I fear my return will be short-lived; I will rejoin the crusade in a week's time."

The Shipmaster trudged up the hill of Ovarum Keep. At the very top of the hill was the Assembly chamber, but the Shipmaster did not go there. Instead, he turned off the main path as he neared the top of the hill. He walked through the woods for a short distance before emerging in a grove. In the middle of the grove sat a simple stone cottage. It had modern plumbing and electricity, but that was the extent of its technology.

"Niro?" a woman's voice called out from an upstairs window.

Surra 'Ovarum had been hanging a recently-washed robe outside the window to dry when she saw her husband emerge from the woods, walking along the small dirt path leading to the doorstep as if he were returning from a normal day at the Assembly.

Niro 'Ovarumee stood in front of his home, spreading his hands

haplessly. "I am back," was all he could really say.

"I can _see_ that," Surra snapped, an unexpected rush of irritation surging through her, replacing the shock at seeing her husband. But just as quickly as it had come, the irritation vanished. Surra left the robe on the windowsill and ducked back into the room. The Shipmaster heard several crashes from inside the house before his wife burst through the front door.

The two lovers embraced each other. This was a side of himself that the Shipmaster always kept deeply hidden from his crew. In front of fellow soldiers, he could not afford to show any of his emotions. In front of his wife, however—he could afford to show a small portion of them.

Niro and Surra embraced. For a short while, they did not move or speak—they were content to remain in each other's arms. Niro was probably showing more emotion in those few short minutes than he had shown in the past ten cycles combined.

"You could have told me you were coming," Surra sighed, resting her head on her husband's shoulder.

Niro gave a deep, rumbling chuckle. "And ruin the surprise? I remember how much you love surprises. Was this not the greatest surprise of all?"

Surra hesitated, but then admitted, "Indeed it was—he"

The two lovers kissed once, interlocking their mandibles, before separating and heading back inside. Niro ran a hand over the carvings in the wall next to the front entrance. They were old family crests, stories of battles fought and won by Niro's forefathers. In the Assembly, there was an entire wall dedicated to the feats and history of the entire Ovarum clan, not just Niro's lineage.

The Shipmaster sat down at the table in the kitchen, removing his energy sword and placing it on the table in front of him. Surra sat at the other side of the table. She nodded over to the stovetop. "Pyraskrill legs," she said. "You chose a good evening to make a surprise return."

Niro 'Ovarumee had always been partial to fried pyraskrill legs. The fiery little amphibians lived mainly on islands and in marshlands. Pyraskrills were usually one of the last creatures that came to mind when it came to the culinary arts—they were small, three-legged creatures that dwelled in tree roots and spent their days leaping across leaf pads that floated on the surface of ponds, lakes, and streams. Not many people liked pyraskrill legs—it was most popular only in Ovarum, the lowlands in the western reaches of Maeron, and the Taham Archipelago.

The reason why most people shied away from the creatures was because they were able to burp up spurts of fire when they croaked, if they so chose. They spurted flame whenever they jumped, as well. Niro had no idea how they were able to do such a thing—but, to be perfectly honest, he did not care. Their legs tasted good when fried and spiced in traditional islander fashion—that was as deep as the Shipmaster's understanding of the odd creatures went.

Surra got up and finished frying and seasoning the pyraskrill legs, serving them up on two steaming plates. Niro poured himself a tall glass of skyfruit juice and sat back down with his wife.

"So?" Surra asked after the first few minutes of her husband's silence. Niro was busy devouring his wife's cookingâ€"too busy to speak until prompted by Surra. "Details? How did you manage to come home? How goes the war? When must you leave?"

Niro swallowed what he had been chewing and washed it down with some juice. This was what he had been both looking forward to and dreading. He looked forward to it because it would feel good to speak his mind in the company of his wife, for once. He knew that he could say anything to her without risk of having his words reported to higher authorities. But he dreaded it because whenever he spoke of the war, it stirred up some uncomfortable thoughts.

"We discovered another Human world. They are turning out to be much moreâ€"numerous than we had originally assumed. My Fleetmaster placed me in charge of the first battlegroup to attack the Humans' naval defenses. I personally destroyed three of their ships, but their weapons bested my own vessel's shields. We nearly lost our reactor core, and were it not for Lightest Of All, our chief engineer, I would not be alive todayâ€" In any case, my vessel was still capable of nether travel, so my Fleetmaster granted me and my crew a week's leave on the homeworld. I shall depart in a week, when the damage to my ship is repaired."

"Were you the one who brought the Q'Rumno Warrior Creche here?" Surra asked.

Niro arched a brow. "How did you know of this?"

"News of visiting warrior crÃ"ches always travels fast," she shrugged. "Your old friend Uros was the one who told me they were supposed to arrive, today, though how he knew is beyond me. His boy is actually going to be undergoing his last trial as a Proselyte in a day, or two."

"Aten?" Niro cleared his throat uncomfortably. He never liked talking about Aten 'Oenairem; it brought up too many painful memories, memories of his own wife bleeding out on the floor of their bedroom. Excluding the time when he and Uros 'Oenairemee found Aten in the basement of a condemned Elder's home, the Shipmaster had only met the boy once, several cycles ago, and it had been a brief, awkward affair.

"No, I speak of one of Uros's dozens of other younglings," Surra rolled her eyes.

"The boy is not his actual son," Niro pointed out, helping himself to another pyraskrill leg. "And he is hardly a youngling."

"Well, of course he is not Uros's actual son. No one is anyone's actual son, these daysâ€" Surra sighed. That had always been something of a sore subject for Surraâ€"she and Niro had had a son, Aerath, soon after his Induction as Kaidon, but the ancient customs of their race had forced her to allow Aerath to be raised in one of the common rooms of Ovarum Keep. He had since joined the Covenant Army, and his parents had barely known him.

"How goes the war, then?" Surra asked. "Surely the Humans must be on their last leg."

The Shipmaster gave a sharp bark of laughter. "If only."

Surra found herself surprised at the raw cynicism in the short burst of emotion. "But the Prophetsâ€|they have been saying that the Humans are nearly-"

"If you truly wish to know how the war is going, dear one, you would do well to ignore anything the Prophets say," Niro sighed. "I have fought the Humans since the beginning of this Age. Since the outbreak of this war, I have personally destroyed eighteen of their ships. I have participated in the destruction of eleven of their worlds. We have killed billions of themâ€|yet we continue to uncover more of their worlds every cycle, and they continue to fight over every inch of their land as if it were blessed by the Godsâ€|"

"Are you no longer certain of our victory?" Surra sounded really surprised, now.

"Our victory is inevitable," Niro countered. "We will burn their worlds one by one until none remain; of that I am certain. But my motivation to make this a reality has lessened, as of lateâ€| I look at Proselytes, at the younglings in the warrior crÃ"ches, and I see that same fervor, that same almost fanatic devotion to the Great Journey, to wiping the Humans from existenceâ€| I was like that, once. But after slaughtering the Humans for fifteen cycles, I confess to having my own thoughts on the war."

"Do not tell me you are feeling guilty for giving the vermin what they deserve," Surra frowned. "You have never spoken of this, before. How long have you felt this way?"

"I feel no guilt," Niro quickly affirmed. "I feel nothing. That is what has changed. I once felt satisfaction when I carried out the Prophets' bidding, when I guided my ship's energy projector across the faces of their planets. I felt the thrill of victory whenever we triumphed time after time again over the Humans. But nowâ€|victory tastes like ash. Dust and ash. I no longer find honor in this warâ€|"

"What do you intend to do?"

"I am a Shipmaster in the Covenant Navy. I will do as commanded by the Prophets until claimed by deathâ€|"be it natural or by design," Niro promptly replied, regaining his composure. In truth, he simply needed to vent. He had kept his opinions, his feelings, and his emotions bottled tightly up inside all throughout his service as Shipmaster of the Sacrosanct. The only person onboard that vessel who he could speak his mind to was Uilar 'Tahamee, his second-master, but even thenâ€| Niro dared not voice these inner thoughts. Were these thoughts ever heard by the wrong ears, the Shipmaster could be punished severely.

And Niro had not even voiced the full extent of his feelings on the war. He had simply admitted how his reaction to winning battle after battle had changed over the years. Had anyone else overheard his admission, they would think little of it. It was likely that the

Shipmaster was having a hard time finding honor in fighting a race that had virtually no way of defending itself against the Covenant's superior technology.

Niro had not voiced his opinions of the Humans themselves. Those were thoughts that he would likely take to the grave before he ever uttered themâ€”if the Prophets ever found out about those thoughts, he would be given the Mark for sure, and then executed as a Heretic.

Niro 'Ovarumee held no fear of death, but he had no intention of ever being executed. If he was going to die, it would either be in battle, by the hand of a close friend, or from old age. If keeping his opinions to himself was what it took to avoid getting branded with the Mark, then so be it. He probably would not have voiced his opinions in any case; it was not his place, as a warrior, to think. It was not his place to ask why a war must be fought; his task was simply to fight. Thinking was best left to the Prophets. Too much thinking could unbalance a warrior's mind.

This was not to say that a warrior should never thinkâ€”that would make him a savage. But there was a fine line between thinking for oneself, and thinking too much.

Before Surra's curiosity got the better of her, Niro simply rose from the table. "Much time has passed since I have last walked upon the homeworld," the Shipmaster sighed. "I believe my weariness was speaking on my behalfâ€”I tend to overthink such matters when I am tired and homesick."

Relief flooded through Surra. Her husband had been teetering on the edge of heresy, and she was relieved to hear that he did not seem to mean everything he had said.

The two lovers went for a walk around the Keep soon after. Niro did not speak for much of the night, preferring instead to listen to Surra's stories of what had been happening at home during his long absences.

They returned home after sunset and went straight to bed. Surra wanted both of them to wake up early and take a boat out onto the straits with the fishermenâ€”a hobby she had grown fond of while Niro was away. It had kept her occupied.

While his wife fell asleep almost right away, Niro lay awake in bed for many hours. As he had feared, earlier, thoughts of the Humans would not leave him alone. Since the Writ of Union between the Sangheili and San Shyuum, the Covenant had sought out and inducted worthy alien races into its ranks. The Mgalekgolo, the Huragok, the Unggoy, the Kig-yar, the Yanme'eâ€”and perhaps the Jiralhanaeâ€”

From Niro's experiences in battle against the Humans, they had proven to be a tough, proud, and resilient race. If the technology gap had not been so skewed, the Shipmaster surmised that the Humans could easily match the Covenant in combat. It was remarkable that they had lasted this long. In truth, they were probably more worthy of induction into the Covenant than many of the Covenant's current member races.

And yet, even before Niro and his people had ever met a single Human, the Prophets had ordered their extinction, declaring them affronts to the Forerunners. Why had they been denied entry into the Covenant? Why had the Prophets been so quick to condemn them?

Niro had so many questions swirling around in his mind. Too many questions. Questions that were best left unasked.

Normally he was able to tune out his own mind, but his brief period of openness with his wife had reignited the thoughts. He knew that he would be plagued by them until he returned to combat. Fortunately, his desire to spend time with his wife was greater than his desire to escape his own thoughts.

But that did not make his thoughts any less unsettling. When Surra woke the following morning, ready to head out onto the straits, she found her husband already waiting on the porch, calmly smoking a pipe.

He had not slept.

4. I Chapter 4: First Step

Chapter Four: First Step

****9****th****** Age of Reclamation, 13********th****** Cycle
>Sanghelios, Urs Prime System

Aten****

There was a surprise waiting for me at the mountain village.

I trudged back into town with the body of the dead snow manx draped over my back, its hind legs dragging out behind me. Several children playing in the snow were the first to see me approaching. It was not long before the village Ret emerged from his home. We met in the square in the middle of the villageâ€”many of the village folk had gathered around to look at the dead creature that had plagued them throughout the winter.

The Ret did not stand by himself, however. Next to him was a man in battered white armor. He had dark gray skin, and burn marks covered the left side of his face. They were not plasma burns, though; I do not know what kind of weapon would cause those kinds of wounds. From what I've heard, the Humans still used weapons that shoot metallic projectiles, but I have never seen them in action.

"I am Qel 'Inanraree," the Ultra introduced himself. "I am the Field Master of the Q'Rumno Warrior Creche. And you are Aten 'Oenairem, Proselyte."

I quickly offered the warrior a deep bow, sinking to a knee as a show of deference. I did not know very much about this man, but he was from a warrior crÃ"che, and he clearly knew that I was a Proselyteâ€”he had identified me as such. "I am honored by your presence, Field Master," I said.

"You may address me on your feet," the Ultra said to me, gesturing for me to stand up. I obeyed, laying the snow manx's body on the

ground as I did so. The veteran nodded to the dead creature that I had dragged all the way from the heart of the woods. "Quite a kill you have, there. I confess, I did not expect you to return here alive after your spike pit trap failed."

I froze for a moment, my brow furrowing slightly in a frown. There was only one way for 'Inanraree to know that my initial plan to kill the snow manx had failed horribly. "You were watching me?" I asked quietly.

"I was indeed," Qel 'Inanraree nodded once. He then nodded a second time to something behind me. "Parala, Hiren; you may reveal yourselves."

At the Ultra's behest, the air behind me shimmered and two more warriors appeared, having deactivated their active camouflage. They wore dark blue armor—they were clearly Minors, but their armor seemed to be designed for stealth-related purposes.

"These two have been shadowing you ever since you arrived in this village," 'Inanraree explained. "And I saw whatever they saw."

Now I remembered the few times during the night when I thought I'd heard movement out in the darkness. Whenever I'd taken a peek to see what the source of the noise was, I would see nothing. I'd thought I was imagining it, but I clearly had not been.

"I nearly died—" I murmured, shaking my head slowly. "Your men were watching me the entire time? Even when my trap did not work? What if the manx had gotten me?"

The Ultra drew his mandibles back in a grin. "What matters is that it did not," he chuckled. "While you failed to prepare for a scenario in which your trap did not work, you did display a good ability to quickly adapt to unfavorable circumstances. I believe the Q'Rumno Warrior Creche may have a place for you, should you be willing to accept it. Are you willing?"

"I am willing," I bowed again.

"Then come with us," the Ultra said. "We leave immediately."

"Immediately?" I echoed, my frown deepening a little. "I have no time to return home and say goodbye to my guardian?"

The Ultra hesitated. "Perhaps we will be able to stop at your home along the way, but only very briefly. The ship on which we are stationed will be departing this very night."

"You have my thanks," I replied.

After exchanging pleasantries with the village Ret and bidding the village folk farewell, I followed Qel 'Inanraree and his two men into a dropship that had been waiting at the edge of town. The Ultra climbed into the cockpit and fired up the engines, sending the dropship hovering several feet into the air. I found myself alone in one of the two troop bays with the pair of warriors who had apparently shadowed me in the woods.

Parala and Hiren. Those were their names.

Neither of them spoke until we had already taken off. "You should be honored," Hiren, the taller of the two, said to me. "The Field Master does not personally recruit Proselytes very often."

"Is that so?" I arched a brow.

"Truly," Parala nodded. "When your Kaidon informed us that he was going to send you against a snow manx without any weapons, the Field Master could not resist personally overseeing your trial. And you did not disappoint."

I then asked the question that had been on my mind ever since the two warriors had deactivated their active camo. "So if the snow manx had gotten meâ€¦what would you have done? I meanâ€¦would you have let it kill me?"

"I believe that is irrelevant," Hiren answered evenly.

"Why?"

It was Hiren's turn to smile, now. "Because the beast didn't get you."

I decided to drop the issue after that.

I had grown up from infancy in one of the common rooms of Oenairem Keep. It was not until I was five cycles oldâ€¦the traditional age for younglings to begin learning the ways of the warriorâ€¦that I was taken in by Uros 'Oenairemee, one of the Elders of my State, for my training. He was not related to me in any way; I've never had any idea which lineage I belong to. But he became my Guardian, trained me in swordsmanship, hand-to-hand combat, as well as the use of plasma weaponryâ€¦not to mention the more philosophical and non-combat-related aspects of war.

Our home was a quaint little cottage in the Crimson Hills. The hills were named for the reddish grass that covered them like the fur of a red vulixâ€¦the snow manx's smaller, desert-dwelling cousin. There were a fair number of towns in this region, but my home was nestled deep in the hills, somewhat removed from these population centers. While it was not part of any of the towns, it was not too far away from them, either. The nearest town was perhaps twenty minutes away by landspeeder.

My Guardian was outside, tending to the blood lilies in front of the cottage. I could see him as we came in for a landing and touched down.

Hiren and Parala both remained aboard the dropship when 'Inanraree brought us in for a landing. I was the only one to disembark. 'Inanraree did not power down the engines; he obviously did not intend to stay here very long at all.

I strode right up to my Guardian and we embraced each other. Physical displays of affection like this...we did not partake in them very often. Uros 'Oenairemee simply was not that kind of person. And I guess I wasn't that kind of person, either.

But every so often, on very special occasions, that barrier came crashing down. This was probably the closest we would ever come to being a real father and son, and I was disappointed that it only lasted for a few moments.

"You have done it," my Guardian smiled warmly. "I always knew you would. And the Q'Rumno, no less! They are a fine warrior creche, most deserving of your service."

My gaze drifted over to the door of our home. I narrowed my eyes when I saw most of my Guardian's personal possessions packed into a small satchel. The roof had been cleaned, the windows washed to the point where they sparkled in the sunlight, the porch had been swept, and the garden had been well tended. The last time the house had looked this good was when Uros had taken me to the Keep for the Proselyte trials. We had been gone for half a cycle.

"Am I not the only one leaving this place?" I asked my Guardian as we separated, gesturing at his packed belongings.

My Guardian glanced in the direction I'd nodded and saw what I was referring to. "Indeed, both of us are leaving this home," he nodded. "I would have told you earlier, but the Kaidon sent you after that snow manx before I had the opportunity. I have been asked to join the High Council."

The appropriate words got caught up in my throat as I struggled to find a response to this revelation. Eventually, I managed to stammer, "_The_ High Council? You...you are going to..."

"To High Charity, yes," my Guardian finished for me. "I have given this home to a desiring member of the clan. I will be departing for the holy city on the morrow."

The two of us stood there looking at each other for a short while. Normally, I suppose people would exchange meaningful goodbyes, or other sorts of pleasantries...but I think that, between Uros 'Oenairemee and myself, whatever we had to say to each other did not need to be conveyed with spoken words. We already knew.

"I assume that those who are transporting you are not to be kept waiting," my Guardian nodded over at the waiting dropship. "So I would suggest you refrain from doing so. Run along, now... Minor," he called me by my newly-gained rank in the Covenant Army.

"Will I ever see you again?" I asked.

Uros 'Oenairemee's smile did not waver, but his eyes grew just the slightest bit mournful. "That, I am afraid I cannot answer," my Guardian replied. "If we are fated to cross paths once again, then it shall be so. If not..." Uros turned away from me and returned to his work in the garden of blood lilies. "Find your own honor, Aten. And when you find it, do not mar it. A man without honor is not a man at all. Follow your honor, and it will never lead you wrong. Now, go...go, and do your people proud."

And I went.

I returned to the dropship, not looking back once. The Field Master of the Q'Rumno Warrior Creche engaged the transport's engines,

sending us soaring back up into the clouds. I sat on one of the hard seats set into the bulkhead of the troop bay, listening to the hum of the dropship's engines. Every so often I would get up and take a peek through one of the portholes. I would sometimes see a vast, cloudy carpet of white; other times I would see sparkling water and vibrant green forests. Once or twice, I spotted a large city, as well.

We flew for several hours, heading south. Our destination was a small naval base in the South of Maeron. It was located down near the equator. It was technically winter there, but its location near the equator earned it a permanently warm climate, unless there was a typhoon or hurricane slamming the coast.

I found myself enjoying the warmer weather. I had no problem with the cold—Oenaiem was one of the northernmost States in the continent of Rhelle, so I was used to the bitter winters. But while cold was something I could endure, warmth was something I could enjoy.

We arrived at the naval base by late afternoon. I did not see very much of the compound, though; the moment I disembarked, Hiren, Parala, and the Field Master escorted me across the airstrip and onto a Type-52 troop carrier.

The Type-52 was similar in function and purpose to the lighter Type-25, only it was equipped with heavier weaponry. Within the next decade, or so, they would probably phase out the Type-25 troop carrier completely. The Humans called them 'phantoms'. Despite our opinions of the enemy, that name seemed to have stuck; members of our own military also referred to the Type-52 as 'phantom'.

Once we were all squared away, the Field Master gave a quick nod to the pilot. For the third time today, I held onto something as we lurched up into the sky. I ended up sitting down because we were moving up more than we were moving forward, so standing became more and more difficult.

As the blue sky gave way to the star-sprinkled black heavens of outer space, the force pushing me down into my seat lessened and eventually vanished altogether.

"You are one of nine new recruits to join my crÃ"che on this day," Qel 'Inanraree told me. "You will be given our marks and inducted into the oronos once we board the _Sacrosanct_."

When I started to ask questions about the crÃ"che, the Field Master quelled me, saying that everything about the warrior crÃ"che would be explained during the induction.

The induction ceremony itself was nothing major. It was not one of those occasions where the entire unit would stand at attention while I was joined into the ranks of the Q'Rumno. At first I was surprised by this; I would have thought that being inducted into a warrior crÃ"che would be a noteworthy event, but I quickly discovered why this was not the case.

We cleared the atmosphere of Sanghelios and approached a large space station that seemed to be some sort of refit and repair hub. There was a handful of ships docked at the array, including—I presumed—the _Sacrosanct_.

The _Sacrosanct_ turned out to be a Reverence-class battlecruiserâ€”a mid-sized class of capital ship. That kind of ship was basically a step below a carrier-class vessel, but a step above a destroyer. Many of the ships docked at the array were damaged in some way, but the _Sacrosanct_ was one of the few that looked ready for battle. It must have been docked here for a little while, already.

"There is a skeleton crew aboard the _Sacrosanct_, at present, as well as my warriors," Qel 'Inanraree explained. "The rest of the crew will be joining us later tonight, at which time we will be leaving to rejoin the Fleet of Righteous Fervor."

The _Sacrosanct's_ forward port-side hangar bay was open. The force field keeping the ship's atmosphere from leaking out the open hangar bay entrance flared cyan and white wherever our phantom made contact. We slid easily into the giant space of the hangar bay and landed alongside the rest of the _Sacrosanct's_ complement of phantom dropships.

The hangar bay was divided into three tiers. Much of the middle tier was filled with both variants of the standard fighter craftâ€”the Type-26 ground support aircraft, or GSA, and its space-faring cousin the Type-27 XMF, or exoatmospheric fighter.

My Guardian had shown me many of these kinds of fighter craft. I could not imagine what it must be like to fly one of them, but if I survived long enoughâ€”perhaps I would one day find out.

The lower tier was filled with Type-31 XMFsâ€”which were fighter craft that were specifically designed for space combat. They were more powerful than the Type-27s, and they were equipped with energy shields.

And the upper tier was filled with the phantom dropships and their weaker Type-25 counterparts. It was from these dropships that the first wave of an attacking force would be deployed. All of the armor and light ground support vehicles would be deployed later via the cruiser's prime gravity lift, so there was no need to clutter the hangar bays with tanks or assault vehicles.

Hiren and Parala marched me out of the hangar bay and into the corridors. I lost track of how many twists and turns we made until we finally found ourselves in a smaller room. Qel 'Inanraree was present, along with another older man clad in the red armor of a Major, and eight adolescents of varying ethnicity who all looked to be around seventeen to twenty cycles old. I am eighteen cycles old, so we were all more or less the same age. Former Proselytes ready to join the Q'Rumno Warrior Creche. All of them seemed to have only recently arrived here. I exchanged nods with a few of them.

Hiren and Parala filed into the room and took their places behind us. The nine of us former Proselytes stood side by side in line, facing the Field Master and the man in the red armor.

"As you already know, I am Qel 'Inanraree, Field Master of the Q'Rumno Warrior Creche," the Ultra introduced himself before moving on to the Major. "And this is Ta'rel 'Neiasree. He is the officer of the creche's third element. It is this portion of the creche to which you nine shall join. Officer, you may proceed," the Field Master bowed his head once and stepped back, allowing the Major to

take the floor.

"I am sure you boys are wondering why no one seems to be making a big fuss out of your induction, here," Major 'Neiasree declared, stepping forward as the Field Master stepped back. "To understand this, allow me to explain the basic structure of my element while Hiren and Parala give you your marks."

Hiren and Parala both had small, needlelike objects equipped with a proportionally small vat of some sort of semi-luminescent ink. When activated, the objects hummed with power, vibrating rapidly. The two young men split up and started with the recruits on either end of the line. They gripped the power needles tightly and, after instructing the recruits to close their eyes, drew the marks into their skin. The marks were shaped almost like two long, thin teardrops connected in the center—the line was wider in the center, but tapered out to sharp points on either end. They extended from slightly above the brow down to around nose level on the cheeks, passing down over the eyes.

I was next-to-last on the right side of the line, so Parala drew in my marks once he was finished with the youth to my right. The needle rapidly pushing the ink into my flesh—and especially around my eyes—was quite painful, but I did not make a single noise of protest. I did not even move. I only did my best to listen to the Major while Parala finished my marks.

"My element—and by extension, this entire warrior crÃche—is divided into two distinct units. They are the oronos and the astiros. All new recruits join the oronos. They—you—must participate in no less than seven battles. If you survive that long, you will be welcomed into the ranks of the astiros."

Parala finished giving me my second mark, moving down to the next recruit in line. The skin around my eyes still stung a bit from the tattoos, but the pain was now barely noticeable for me. Blinking would feel odd for a short while, but that, too, would soon fade.

"In truth, there are only two occasions during your service in my unit that will be worthy of note," 'Neiasree explained. "The first will be your induction into the astiros, and the second will be your departure from this warrior crÃche into a combat legion. Your induction into the oronos means little to the rest of the crÃche because most of you will not join the astiros. You will not survive that long. Most of you are already dead. This is the purpose of the oronos; to weed out the weaklings. The ones who survive to the level of the astiros are the ones who have clearly learned how to fight. Perhaps one or more of you will achieve this honor."

Hiren and Parala finished giving the rest of the recruits the mark of the crÃche shortly afterwards. We were then commanded to undress, removing our civilian clothing. We were given black bodysuits, which we promptly put on. The bodysuit was what was customarily worn underneath a combat harness.

We were each then given a blue combat harness, a directed energy rifle, and a directed energy pistol for a sidearm.

"Your armor and your weapons are extensions of your person," the

Field Master declared. "If they are lost or damaged during combat, they will be replaced or repaired by the Quartermaster. You, however, are responsible for their upkeep in between battles. Treat your equipment as you would treat yourself. Go, now, and prepare for our next engagement. May the Gods smile upon you all."

"_They'll be visiting the Gods soon enough_â€|" I heard Hiren mutter to his companion under his breath. I was only able to hear because the astir was standing over by my end of the line. His words did not exactly instill me with confidence.

The Field Master informed us that we would all be sharing a barracks and gave us the location dismissed us, and we filed out of the room.

"Quite the inspirational oration, would you not say?" one of the recruitsâ€"a black-skinned, green-eyed youthâ€"chuckled. His dark skin and his accent suggested that he was from the Taham Archipelago. At least, that would be my guess.

"How can you find humor at a time like this?" another youthâ€"dark brown-skinned with yellow eyesâ€"grunted. I could not help but agree; I probably would have asked the same question.

The green-eyed youth drew his mandibles back in a grin. "We are all dead men, you see? Like the good Major said. There will be plenty of time for solemnity when I come back to life."

"When you come back to life?" I arched a brow, ignoring the discomfort caused by the thin tattoo that had been inked through it. "I do not understand."

"Well, then, allow me to enlighten you," the green-eyed youth turned to me as we reached a junction in the corridors and rounded a corner, heading towards our assigned barracks. "The fact that most newly-inducted members of warrior crÃ"ches do not survive to become astiros is not very well-known to the civilian populace. Keeping that knowledge in mind, it is safe to say that most of us will not survive the next cycle. It is during this stage of our lives that we are _expected_ to die. So, in a sense, we are already dead. But if we fight our hardest, and if Fate smiles on usâ€"we will join the astiros, and in doing so, we will become living warriors once again."

That earned silent, blank stares from most of the other recruits.

"_Islanders_â€|" the dark-skinned, yellow-eyed youth muttered.

While I tried to wrap my mind around my compatriot's reasoning, we entered our barracks. It was a small, simple room with ten sleeping bunks and an equal amount of personal storage lockers. I was surprised to find that the combat harness was actually comfortable enough to sleep in. This was likely because it was not a full suit of armorâ€"it simply covered enough of our bodies to generate a sufficient shield. The higher ranks, however, were usually equipped with heavier, more protecting combat harnesses, though. As oronos of a warrior creche, though, we were not exactly deserving of that kind of armor, yet.

I climbed into one of the lower bunks and relaxed. I had had a long day, and I could use the rest.

The green-eyed youth ended up grabbing the bunk above me. "I fear you will have to share bunks with me," he said as he got settled in. "And so, as my bunkmate, I believe an exchange of names is in order. Would you care to tell me which part of Sanghelios has the honor of being your home?"

"Oenaiem State," I replied. "One of the northernmost states of Rhelle."

"The Highlands? You are from the Highlands?" the green-eyed youth shifted in his bunk, obviously interested.

The region that my home state was part of was one of the highest areas of the planet, earning the entire region the name Highlands. It had been a long time since I'd heard anyone use that name, though. I had not traveled out of the Highlands very often, and the term 'highlander' was more often used by those who dwelt elsewhere.

"Indeed, I am from the Highlands."

"Well, highlander, my name is Ymir 'Tahamee," the islander introduced himself, confirming my earlier suspicions about his ethnicity. "I hail from the Archipelago. And believe what you will, but I am actually rather sane compared to most islanders you will meet. And your name isâ€|?"

"Aten," I replied. I was about to say 'Oenaiem', which had been my surname for my entire life up until nowâ€|but my induction into a warrior crÃ"che had changed that. Now, I could add the '-ee' honorific reserved for members of the military. "Aten 'Oenaiemee."

"Feels good, does it not?"

"Hm?"

"Saying your name with the military honorific."

I had to admitâ€|it did feel rather satisfying. But I was not willing to divulge all of my feelings with this stranger quite yet. "I suppose."

"Well it should," the green-eyed youth, Ymir, declared. "It has a nice ring. I pray you survive what Fate has in store for us. I would have you experience laughter before that stereotypical cold persona of the warrior consumes you whole."

"Perhaps you should reserve a portion of those prayers for yourself," I suggested. "After all, maybe you are the one whom Fate has slated to die."

There was a moment's hesitation from Ymir, and then he said, "You're not making any sense at all. Now forgive me, but I must rest. The day has been long, and I have grown weary. I shall see you again on the morrow."

I rested my head back and let my eyes slide shut, taking a few deep breaths to help myself relax. I have spent much of my life training for my service in the military, so I never really traveled around the world very much. I have not met very many people in my lifetimeâ€|but of all the people I _have_ met, I would say that Ymir 'Tahamee was, by far, the mostâ€|eccentric.

I am still having some trouble figuring out how a person like him was able to join a warrior crÃ"che in the first place. But enough thoughts on that, for now. Now was a time for rest.

"_Islanders_â€|" I muttered quietly to myself.

* * *

><p>Author's Note**

Okay, normally when someone asks me something in a review I answer them with a PM. However, the issue of me referring to Sangheili as 'men and women' has been brought up by multiple individuals, so I'm addressing it here for everyone to see. Mostly because my reasoning can get quite lengthy, and it would be tedious typing it up several times for several different people.

_Now, first off, this story is told wholly and completely from a Sangheili perspective. It is assumed that everything in the story is in the Sangeili language, so there really is no need to come up with Sangheili words, in many cases. I think the issue is that most of you are associating the words 'man' and 'woman' with _Human_, _when they actually, in this case, are not. By that same logic, the words 'man' and 'woman' are not related to _Sangheili_. _All 'man' and 'woman' mean is just a way of identifying an individual of a certain gender. I think it is actually much more realistic than calling them 'Sangheili male' or 'Sangheili female'. Could you imagine what it would have been like if I'd had Alley Garriis calling everyone 'Human male' and 'Human female'? It would have been ridiculous._

Okay, time to reel myself back in. Ultimately, this story is in some sort of a translation format. An English-ized version of a Sangheili story. As such, certain things such as names (Aten, Uros, Parala), objects with no Human equivalent (Sanghelian animals: grahla, manx, vulix), titles (Ret, Kaidon), etc. etc. will remain in the Sangheili language. Everything else is told in English. I simply consider the words 'man' and 'woman' basic enough to be used as their English counterparts. I probably did not need that whole second paragraph; I think this last point would have summed everything up quite nicely. Ah well...you get to read it all!

WHEW... That was a long-ass note. See what I mean by lengthy?

_Alright, I'll get out of your hair now. I hope this cleared things up for everyone. And if anyone _still_ has a problem with me using 'man' and 'woman' to describe the Sangheili...well, sorry, but tough darts!_

TheAmateur

Chapter Five: Deacon

9**th**** Age of Reclamation, 13****th**** Cycle
>En Route to Unyielding Heirophant, Nether

**Niro**

Niro 'Ovarumee climbed out of his bunk. If he had any dreams during his slumber, he did not remember them. This was most likely for the best; the few dreams that Niro remembered had not been pleasant ones. A side-effect of fighting almost constantly in a war for thirteen cycles, no doubt. Not to mention the crusade against the Heretics _before_ the current war had broken out.

The Shipmaster was already wearing his bodysuit—the thin, form-fitting black layer of clothing that was worn underneath a combat harness. He opened up his locker, which was where he had stowed his armor, one of the symbols of his office. The Shipmaster donned his golden armor, clipping his blade to the magnetic strip around his waist. Fully clothed and armored, Niro left his quarters and headed into the corridors.

Once upon a time, it would have taken months to make the nether jump that the _Sacrosanct_ was currently making. But Sangheili technology had improved greatly ever since the First Union—the when the Sangheili and San 'Shyuum formed the alliance that would become the Covenant. Faster-than-light drives were one of many facets of technology that had seen massive improvement. Nether jumps that once would have taken months now took days. Even the longest ones rarely exceeded a week's travel.

The Shipmaster made his way through the corridors until he reached an elevator. The elevators were gravity-lift based and operated on voice commands. All the Shipmaster had to do was step into the lift and speak their desired destination, and the lift would utilize the system of passageways that spread all throughout the cruiser to get him wherever he needed to go.

This was a privilege only officers could take advantage of, however. Normal crewmen could only use lifts to move from deck to deck; they could not take them all throughout the ship. But the Shipmaster, fortunately, qualified as an officer.

Niro stepped into the nearest lift and commanded, "_Bridge_."

The _Sacrosanct_ was due to arrive at the _Unyielding Heirophant_, soon. The _Unyielding Heirophant_ was one of the largest command and control centers in use by the Covenant Military. It was a mobile planetoid-class battlestation, and its primary function was to serve as a rendezvous point for active naval fleets. Due to its sheer size, it was able to support several standard-sized fleets simultaneously.

The bridge of the _Sacrosanct_ was located deep in the core of the vessel. Only bridge officers, Huragok technicians, and the ship's Deacon were allowed in that particular section of the vessel. Of course, the _Sacrosanct_ did not have a deacon—they were sent to vessels that were in need of a religious figure onboard to keep up the spirituality of the crew. The _Sacrosanct_ had never been in need

of one, but something seemed to have changed the High Council's mindâ€”Niro had been informed that there would be a new deacon waiting for him at the _Unyielding Heirophant_.

The Shipmaster emerged from the lift and walked down the short corridor and up to the bridge entrance. Uredi Aido Nissu and Erano Aido Vanaâ€”the _Sacrosanct's_ Mgalekgolo bond brothersâ€”stood on either side of the bridge's entrance, waiting for Niro's arrival. They both lowered their 'heads' a fraction of an inch as Niro approached.

"_Shipmaster_â€”|" they hummed in unison. They did not speak like other species. They had no mouths or vocal chordsâ€”they were able to vibrate their bodies in such a way that enabled them to form words that were almost _felt_ more than they were heard.

"Erano, Uredi," Niro 'Ovarumee bowed his head and saluted the bond brothers as he passed them by and stepped into the bridge, addressing them by their personal names. They accompanied him, lumbering through the open bridge entrance after their Shipmaster.

"Shipmaster on deck!" Uilar 'Tahamee, Niro's second-master, barked when he saw his superior emerge through the entrance. Eyom 'Nelasee, Ni'ram 'Teharolee, and R'lyes 'Suruineeâ€”the only other bridge crewmembers currently on dutyâ€”rose from their stations, standing at attention, their heads bowed and their fists clasped to their hearts.

"As you were," the Shipmaster nodded to his subordinates, and they returned to their duties.

Uilar stepped aside and offered Niro the command chair.

The Shipmaster sat down.

"We will arrive at the _Unyielding Heirophant_ in approximately six minutes," the second-master reported. "All systems are functioning at optimal capacity."

"Very good," Niro nodded, calling up the ship's schematics and running a quick check to make sure everything was still in order, which it was. Now that Niro was on the bridge, the second-master was allowed to retire to his quarters, but Uilar 'Tahamee decided to remain with the Shipmaster for their arrival at the _Unyielding Heirophant_.

"Returning to normal space in one minute," Eyom 'Nelasee, the helmsman, spoke up, breaking the tentative silence that had fallen over the bridge crew as they continued their work. "Exit vector established. Powering down FTL driveâ€”|"

The bridge of the _Sacrosanct_ was a very large space, and only about half of it was used most of the time. In the rear of the bridge, behind the Shipmaster's chair, was a large, round holotank. It looked almost like an ordinary table when it was inactive. Niro rose from his chair and headed back to the holotank. He pressed his palm to a node set into the side of the holotank, and it sprang to life. During a battle, a holographic representation of a planet or a fleet would have sprung into existence, but the _Sacrosanct_ was in the Nether, right now. There was nothing to show.

Niro was going to use it for face-to-face communication with his Fleetmaster once they dropped out of the Nether, which was happening right this moment.

"Power-down complete, returning to normal spaceâ€|now," 'Nelasee announced. The ship groaned for an instant, and Niro heard that odd, omnipresent rushing sound that accompanied jumps into and out of the Nether.

The _Sacrosanct_ had arrived.

The viewscreen flickered a few times before resolving into an image of the _Unyielding Heirophant_. The command station was hugeâ€"at least thirty kilometers across and ten kilometers in circumference. It was looked like two teardrops facing away from each other, with their tips touching, giving it the shape of a figure eight. There was also a rotating ring connected by numerous spokes and passageways to the central hub of the mobile station. Ships in need of repair could dock at that ringâ€"it was crewed by thousands of Huragok.

The main sections of the stationâ€"the bulbous parts of the figure eightâ€"contained giant 'world rooms'. They were massive chambers with artificially-created environmentsâ€"trees, plantlife, animals, riversâ€"to simulate the worlds of the Covenant. Because of this, the crews of ships under repair could feel more like they were on shore leave, rather than on a giant mobile space station.

Niro had visited many of these world rooms during his previous cycles of service in the Covenant Navy, but he did not know if he would be visiting any of them today. He was under the assumption that once the _Sacrosanct_ rejoined the Fleet, they would depart. Where their next destination would be, only the Fleetmaster would know. Perhaps he had already informed the other shipmasters of the Fleet, but Niro was still in the dark.

"Incoming transmission from the _Sacred Flame,_" Ni'ram 'Teharolee spoke up after Niro activated the holotank. "The Fleetmaster is hailing us."

"Patch it through to the holotank," Niro ordered the communications officer. 'Teharolee complied, and a holographic image of Keron 'Ahrmonreeâ€"the Fleetmaster of the Fleet of Righteous Fervorâ€"materialized in the centre of the round holotank. Niro clasped his right fist to his left heart and bowed his head in a salute. "Fleetmaster," he addressed his superior.

"_Shipmaster 'Ovarumee,_" the Fleetmaster returned the salute, allowing Niro to relax. "_Your return is much appreciated. I held the Fleet for you_."

"My thanks," Niro bowed once more, though he knew that the Fleetmaster had not done this out of friendship. The _Sacrosanct_ was one of the more powerful vessels in the fleet, aside from the core group of assault carriers, and the Fleetmaster would have only needed to wait a few extra days for Niro's arrival.

The miniature, holographic Fleetmaster turned away momentarily. One of his crewmembers must have informed him of something that required his attention. It was only for an instant, though; the Fleetmaster

murmured something to the unseen crewmember and turned back to Niro. "_Apologies,_" he said briefly before continuing. "_One of our scout vessels discovered another world contaminated by the presence of Humans,_" the Fleetmaster explained. "_Forerunner relics have also been detected on this world. Imperial Admiral 'Wattinree himself has ordered our fleet to perform the cleansing._"

Niro gave a light grin, though there was no happiness behind it. It was simply a facial expression he had learned to paste onto his face when necessary. "And thus, we find our way into battle once more," the Shipmaster declared.

"_Truly,_" Fleetmaster 'Ahrmonree nodded once in agreement. "_I am sure the new oronos of the Q'Rumno crÃ"che are eager to spill their first blood. This battle will provide them with plenty. I am sending you the coordinates of our next destination immediately. Also, a transport is on its way to your vessel from the _Unyielding Heirophant,_" the Fleetmaster added. "_Onboard is your ship's new Deacon. I am sure he will make a mostâ€|intriguingâ€|addition to your crew_."

Niro was not sure what to make of his superior's words. The way he had said 'intriguing' wasâ€|well, Niro did not know what to make of it. And the Shipmaster was not even sure why he was being sent a deacon in the _first_ place; he had captained the _Sacrosanct_ for a long time without need of a religious authority onboard. But it was not his place to question his commanders, however, so he simply bowed one last time.

"_That is all, Shipmaster,_" the Fleetmaster concluded. "_Return to your post_."

Niro clasped his fist to his left heart once again. "May honor light your way."

"_And yours, as well,_" the Fleetmaster returned the salute before ending the transmission. His holographic image dissolved into pixels of light which fell across the surface of the holotank and vanished.

"Second-Master, the bridge is yours," Niro said to Uilar. "I am going to Hangar Bay Three. Our new Deacon will be arriving very soon. Take us into the Nether if the rest of the Fleet begins making the jump."

"Your will, Shipmaster," Uilar 'Tahamee bowed his head and took the command chair once more.

Niro traded nods with the bond brothers as he left the bridge. The Shipmaster trudged back down the corridor and into the lift. Once he was inside, he spoke the name of the area of the ship to which he wanted to go, and the lift hummed to life, whisking Niro away towards the stern of the cruiser.

The Shipmaster arrived at Hangar Bay Three just in time to see a phantom dropship enter through the force field separating the interior of the bay from outer space. Once the dropship entered, there was a loud, mechanical grinding noise, and the hangar doors slowly slid shut, completely sealing off the hangar bay from outer space.

Niro entered the hangar bay on the level of its middle tier. The phantom docked on the upper level, so the Shipmaster stepped into one of the gravity lifts that transported him upwards. He stepped out of the indigo light and back onto the floor once he reached the top.

The phantom dropship had already landed and was in the process of powering down. The pilot emerged from the cockpit, trading salutes with his Shipmaster as he passed by. The phantom's passenger—the new Deacon of the _Sacrosanct_—climbed out of the phantom right behind the pilot.

Niro's mandibles twitched slightly in surprise, but he quickly forced down any physical reaction that was about to follow. In all his time as a Shipmaster of the Covenant Navy, he had seen many, many things. But one thing he had _never_ seen was a Prophet serving on a naval vessel as a common Deacon. They usually served out their years as Deacons on the myriad colonies of the Covenant; not on warships.

But, sure enough, the passenger of the phantom dropship was a short, stooped San 'Shyuum, clad in the white robes of a Deacon. Even more surprising was the fact that he was walking on his own two legs, not the anti-gravity thrones that Prophets lived their lives in. And perhaps most surprising of all was the San 'Shyuum's age; 'Deacon' was one of the lowest ranks in the government, something that Prophets ascended through in their younger years. This particular Prophet, however, judging from his light brown skin and the length of the beard growing from the wattles underneath his chin, was obviously middle-aged, edging towards seniority.

The San 'Shyuum Deacon walked slowly across the hangar bay and came to a stop in front of Niro. For a moment, Niro was at a loss on what he should do, but logic quickly took hold of him. Prophet or not, this newcomer was a Deacon, and on board Niro's ship, to boot. No, there was no questioning who had the authority. Still—Niro knew that he would feel odd giving orders to a San 'Shyuum.

"You are the deacon sent by the High Council?" Niro asked the San 'Shyuum.

The Deacon offered a light shrug. "It is a disgraceful formality; nothing more."

Niro hesitated, his brow furrowing in a frown. "Your meaning eludes me."

"Oh, come now, Shipmaster, I know as well as you that your ship does not need a deacon," the San 'Shyuum sighed, gesturing for the Shipmaster to walk alongside him back to the gravity lift. "Ships crewed by your kind rarely do."

"So why, then, have they sent you to me?"

"I chose it," the Deacon grunted. He stepped into the gravity lift with Niro, floating down to the middle tier of the hangar bay. They stepped off onto the floor and exited the hangar, returning to the corridors. "I _chose_ to come to this sewer. An amusing notion, is it not?"

Niro quickened his pace and turned around, planting himself right in front of the San 'Shyuum, blocking the Deacon's path. "Prophet you may be, but I will not allow you to slander against my ship. You are Deacon and I am Shipmaster; so long as you are a part of my crew, you will guard your tongue."

The Deacon arched an eyebrow. "Or what?" he asked, his true emotions unreadable behind his sharp, gray eyes. He let the challenge hang in the air, waiting to see what the Shipmaster's response would be.

"Or I will have you confined to a brig with quarter rations until you learn respect," Niro promptly replied. He then arched his own brow and added, "And you would not inform the High Council, I think, for I have a feeling that they would not intercede on your behalf."

The San 'Shyuum was silent, holding the Shipmaster's gaze for several long seconds, not making any move. Then, finally, the corner of his mouth curved up slightly in a faint, twisted smile. "Fading Dusk," he finally said when Niro stepped away and they resumed walking down the corridor.

Niro gave a questioning grunt, not catching the Deacon's meaning.

"Is it not your custom to have an exchange of names when meeting strangers?" the Deacon queried.

"Among my own people, yes," the Shipmaster nodded. The Shipmaster and the Deacon reached an elevator and stepped inside. Niro got the lift moving before he continued what he was saying.

"But not with mine," the San 'Shyuum finished for the Shipmaster. "Difficult, is it not, to exchange names with a people who prefer to be known by their titles and offices, rather than their names?"

The lift came to a halt and opened, allowing its two occupants to exit onto the new deck.

"Difficult indeed," Niro agreed. He came to a stop outside a sealed door. The Shipmaster hesitated for a moment, deciding whether or not he wanted to exchange names with this stranger. Ultimately, he decided that it could do no harm. And after all, the Prophet _had_ initiated it. "My name is Niro 'Ovarumee, son of Nhalek 'Tahamaiâ€|though _Shipmaster_ will be sufficient. And you?"

The Deacon gave a quiet chuckle. "I had three names, onceâ€|" he mused. "A birth name for family and familiars, a title of power and respect for the High Councilâ€|though I am afraid I no longer have any claim to either of these names. I have only my third name, my common nameâ€|my least important name. Fading Duskâ€|" the San 'Shyuum's cynical, twisted leer of a smile widened a hair. "Though _Deacon_ will be sufficient."

Niro opened a panel in the bulkhead and entered a quick series of commands. The red lights set into the door turned green, and the door hissed open, splitting into three pieces and sliding away into the walls. Beyond the doorway was a small, simple chamber adorned with a bed and other accommodations.

"The Deacon's quarters," Niro gestured to the room. "The Shrine is on this deck, not far from here. I am certain you will be able to easily find it. The Unggoy congregate there on their own every seventh day. My own kind visit at their leisure, or not at all. Your task here will not be difficultâ€"the faith of my crew has never wavered."

"Your crew's spirituality was never in doubt," Dusk informed the Shipmaster. "As I have said before, my presence here is not a result of wavering faith, but of politics."

Niro turned to leave, but one last question nagging at the back of his mind prompted him to stay for another few moments. "Might you be willing to divulge the circumstances of your arrival here?"

"That is a tale best told over firewhiskey," the Deacon grunted, stepping into his quarters. "And I would not have you intoxicated before a battle. And more to the point, my journey from High Charity has been a long one. I am weary and require rest. By your leaveâ€"|_Shipmaster_."

Niro stepped back. "Welcome aboard, Deacon," he said as the doors hissed shut.

As the Shipmaster returned to the lift and started making his way back to the bridge, he found himself agreeing with what the Fleetmaster had said over the holotank. "_Intriguing_â€|" he murmured to himself.

The _Sacrosanct_ entered the Nether soon afterwards. Niro felt the shudder and heard the sounds of the nether jump as he stepped out of the lift. He reentered the bridge, finding it very much like how he had left it, only the holotanks and viewscreens had all returned to their blank, inactive states now that the ship was back in the Nether.

The crew did not rise and stand at attention, this time, thoughâ€"they only did this when the Shipmaster came on duty. Niro was already on duty; he normally would not have left the bridge during his watch, but the Deacon's arrival had broken the routine this one time.

Uilar 'Tahamee rose from the command chair once more, offering it to Niro. The Shipmaster accepted the chair and sat down.

"We have laid in a course for our next destination," the second-master informed his superior. "We shall arrive in approximately thirty hours."

"Good."

"Shipmaster, if I may ask," Eyom 'Nelasee, the helmsman, twisted around in his seat to address Niro. "Why has a Deacon been assigned to this vessel? In what way has the faith of this crew been unfavorable in the eyes of the High Council?"

Niro hesitated. "The circumstances of our Deacon's assignment to this ship are unknown to me, but I can assure you that our faith was not a deciding factor."

That made the helmsman frown. "I do not understand. Deacons are sent to reinforce the spirituality of vessels showing a lack of faith. We have demonstrated no such lack of faith, so I ask againâ€|why have we been sent a Deacon?"

"Mind your tone, Helmsman," Uilar growled, but Niro quelled his second-master before 'Tahamee could say anything more.

"Have I mentioned that the Deacon is a middle-aged Prophet?" Niro interrupted. Both the second-master and the helmsman stared at the Shipmaster, almost uncomprehending. The only other bridge crewmember currently on duty was R'lyes 'Suruinee, the weapons officer, but he gave no outward reaction. This was not unexpectedâ€|the weapons officer rarely ever spoke, unless the ship was under attack.

"A Prophet, you say?" 'Nelasee sounded dubious. The helmsman knew that Niro was telling the truth, but he was simply having trouble wrapping his mind around the concept of having a Prophet onboard, serving as a lowly ship's deacon. Such a position would put him under the authority of the officersâ€|and having a Prophet under the authority of a Sangheili was unprecedented. Even if this was not the first time such an occurrence had come to pass, it was a rare enough occurrence to avoid having a documented precedent.

"And not just any young San 'Shyuum working his way up the ladder," the Shipmaster said. "The Deacon is most certainly middle-aged. Someone his age should have a much, much higher rankâ€|there are several factors that do not add up. But despite our curiosity, the circumstances of the Deacon's assignment are not our concern. All we can afford to be focused on is the impending battle. The reason why I have raised the subject in the first place is because I want you to be aware that none of you are to take orders of any kind from this Prophet. He is a Deacon, and you are officers. Rank comes before species. Am I understood?"

"Perfectly, Shipmaster," Eyom 'Nelasee promptly replied. 'Teharolee also replied in the affirmative. And when the Shipmaster looked to him for acknowledgment, R'lyes 'Suruinee gave a single nod.

Within the next few minutes, Sesa 'Yeromee emerged onto the bridge, taking up his post at the Ops station. With the operations officer's arrival, Uilar 'Tahamee took his leave and left to get some rest. Niro settled back into his seat and called up the ship's schematics. It was going to be a long, boring wait until he could return to the solitude of his quarters, so he decided to occupy himself as best he could in the meantime.

"A middle-aged Prophetâ€|" 'Nelasee said quietly to himself as he continued performing a scan on the _Sacrosanct's_ aft maneuvering thrusters. And, unaware of the fact that he was the third individual to describe the situation as such within the past hour, the helmsman murmured, "_Intriguing_â€|"

6. I Chapter 6: Forward

Chapter Six: Forward

9**th**** Age of Reclamation, 13****th**** Cycle
>Human World, Unknown System

**Aten**

I slept well.

I took this in stride, considering it was the last measure of sleep I would get before plunging into battle. The nether jump from the Unyielding Heirophant to our destination had taken only three days.

Or, at least, the spacefaring equivalent of three daysâ€|

My point is that the wait was not a long one. I found myself somewhat surprised at the short length of the journey; fighting in battle had been something I'd always known I was about to do, but it had always felt like some distant, far-off eventuality, rather than an imminent one. What had also surprised me was the fact that the veterans of the Q'Rumno crÃ"che took little to no interest in continuing the training of me or the other eight new additions to the oronos.

The nine of us were pariahs of a sort; barely anyone even acknowledged our existence. The warriors of the Q'Rumno were like brothers to one another; they ate and drank together, they sparred and trained together, they slept in the same barracks, they complimented and traded jabs with one anotherâ€"they acted like a giant family. Even the members of the oronos who had already fought in and survived their first battle were included in the family.

But usâ€|the nine of us who had yet to prove ourselves in battle were absolutely nothing in the eyes of the veterans. Do not mistake my meaning; we were not abused or treated with any kind of contempt. We were simply ignored. Excluded from the daily rituals of the warriors. We were not completely shunned, but no one would make any effort to speak to us. And when we took the initiative and tried to have words with the veterans, they would gaze at us like we were insects for a few moments before returning to whatever it was that they had been doing.

It was like we were already dead. And it was for that reason, foremost among many others, that I could not wait to dive headfirst into the heat of battle. I wanted to be treated like a living warrior, not a phantom presence.

Sometimes I grew weary of life being nothing but a constant stream of preparation and testing. My childhood had been nothing but preparation for my time as a Proselyte, which in turn had been preparation for my service in a warrior crÃ"che. Now that I was finally in a crÃ"che, I now found myself having to pass many more tests just to be accepted fully into its ranks. And this was not even the end of the journey; after my service in the crÃ"che was complete, I would then join a proper combat legion and get an assignment to one of the infantry units. And then perhaps, one day, I could even join the ranks of the zealots, or those of Special Operationsâ€|but such a goal was so distant that it barely even crossed my mind.

And this was all based on the assumption that I survived the next cycle. And from what I've seen and heard from the astiros of the Q'Rumno, that was a pretty big assumption. Still, thoughâ€|I have lived my life above and beyond the expectations of others. Many younglings began their training at the onset of pubescence; I began

my training from the time I was able to stand. Many younglings joined a warrior crÃ"che through a trial of arms against their peers; I joined the Q'Rumno by killing a giant snow manx with nothing but a spade, a small knife, and my wits.

I have a destiny, I am sure; if I did not believe this, I would not have been able to do half of the things I have done. I would not be the person I am today. And for that reason, I refuse to believe that my destiny involves dying like livestock in my first scuffle with fate. But enough of this talk...

I had dreams of fire and glory. I waded through hordes of ugly, misshapen monsters, felling them by the dozen with great strokes of my sword, bathing in their blood. And with a mere jostle of my shoulders, all of it dissolved and I found myself lying in my bunk, back onboard the _Sacrosanct_. Back in reality.

"Rise, my friend," a familiar voice with a light Archipelago accent swam into my consciousness, along with the shaking. I made the full transition from my dreams to reality and opened my eyes, gazing blearily at Y'mir 'Tahamee. The dark-skinned youth drew back his mandibles in a grin. "Death waits for no man, Aten. It is time."

"Enough of your blather, islander," Oros 'Kusoveeâ€"the dark brown-skinned, yellow-eyed youth from the Urassa Desertâ€"growled as he clipped his sidearm to his waist.

I climbed out of my bunk and grabbed my weapons, securing my sidearm to my hip and my energy rifle to my backâ€"I had slept in my combat harness, so I did not need to worry about suiting up beforehand. We had all done this; had we been caught unprepared for our summons to battle, the consequencesâ€"I do not even want to think of what they would have been. And so, none of us had removed our armor ever since our induction into the oronos of the Q'Rumnoâ€"save for the two times we bathed ourselves since then.

The moment I swung myself out of my bunk, the barracks doors split open and one of the astirosâ€"a tall, muscular warrior named Eolisâ€"strode inside, driving us out into the corridor with some of the most obscene profanity I've ever heard in my life. The nine of us hurried into formation and jogged our way through the corridors towards the nearest lift.

All around us, personnel were scrambling to their battle stations. Faint red lights were flashing from the ceiling, signifying a high-level alert. Huragok were floating their way through the ship, using the myriad service tunnels that had been designed specifically for them, reporting to their stations. We also passed a few members of the small detachment of regular infantry forces stationed on the _Sacrosanct_. They would be making their way towards the gravity lift room, from which the _Sacrosanct_ would deploy its complement of regular warriors.

As for us, the members of the warrior crÃ"che; we were going to be loaded up onto dropships and sent ahead of the fleet and onto the Human planet. Once we landed, it would be our task to clear and secure a landing zone for the _Sacrosanct_ to come groundside and deploy the rest of the infantry stationed onboard.

Of course, the fleet would have to destroy any resisting Human naval forces before they could reinforce us. But I cannot recall an occasion where the Human navy has bested our own, save for a few scattered, isolated incidents. And the Q'Rumno would not be alone on the surface; the Issio Warrior Creche was also attached to this fleetâ€”they would go planetside with us as well.

"You ready to face your mortality, Aten?" Y'mir asked me after we piled into the lift.

"As ready as I will ever be," I replied. "And you?"

"Oh, I do not have to trouble myself over such matters," the dark-skinned, green-eyed youth chuckled. "Dying before I join a combat legion is not part of my destiny, so I have no reason to worry. We have discussed this, already."

"If you do not silence yourself, I will send you into battle without your armor," Eolis growled threateningly. "Then we will see how much protection your destiny will yield."

"Your threats fall not on deaf ears," Y'mir assured the astir, wisely deciding to speak no more. However, when I caught a glimpse of the islander's eyes, I noted that their gleam had not diminished. I'm sure he would simply resume his endless torrent of speech the moment Eolis left us or ambled out of earshot.

The lift came to a stop and we all filed out. We joined scores of other warriors in the corridors; all of us heading into Hangar Bay Two. All of the phantom dropships had been moved to the middle tierâ€”it would take too much time to wait for hundreds of warriors to move to the upper tier.

Qel 'Inanraree, the Field Master of the Q'Rumno Warrior Creche, stood in front of the mass of phantoms, feet spread apart and hands on his hips, patiently waiting as his forces assembled in front of him. Behind the phantoms were the open hangar doors, revealing the yawning void of outer space. I was actually able to see three or four of the other vessels in the fleet through the opening. Bright flashes of light pulsed through the darkness as they fired plasma torpedoes at an unseen target.

The astiros were standing in the front of the formation, facing the Field Master. The oronosâ€”who were much more numerous than the astirosâ€”were assembled behind the veterans. As new recruits, my eight comrades and I stood in the very back.

Once the crÃ”che was fully mobilized, the Field Master began to speak. "Welcome to the edge of the precipice, warriors!" he exclaimed. "Welcome to this crossroads of fate. Once again, we plunge ourselves into danger and peril for the glory of the Prophets and the Gods. Praise be to the Foreunners!"

Many of the assembled warriors murmured similar expressions of praise in response. When they all fell silent, the Field Master went on.

"On this day, we march once more into battle. On this day, our honor shall burn brighter than the stars! By the glory of the Prophets and the Forerunners, we shall send the Humans who taint this world to the

void!" The Field Master then proceeded to follow the traditional pre-battle ritual and began to quote the Writ of Union. "When we joined the Covenant, we took an oath!"

"_According to our station! All without exception!_" hundreds of voicesâ€"mine includedâ€"thundered in a unison response.

"On the blood of our fathers, on the blood of our sons, we swore to uphold the Covenant!" the Field Master continued.

"_Even to our dying breath!_" I recited the words that my Guardian had burned into my memory from my earliest days.

"Those who would break this oath or defy our Covenant are Heretics, worthy of neither pity nor mercy!"

"_We shall grind them into dust!_"

"And continue our march to glorious salvation!" the Field Master finished. As I said earlier, it was an ancient tradition for a field commander to recite that portion of the Writ of Union to his warriors before entering battle. And I must sayâ€"though I hoped I would be taking part in many more battles in the future, I do not think this ritual will ever get repetitive.

The Field Master wished us well and ordered us to the phantoms. The pilots had all been standing outside of their ships, reciting the Writ of Union alongside us. Now that we had been dismissed, they took their leave and clambered into their dropships. The hangar bay rumbled with the collective roar of dozens of main engines being engaged.

"_Dead men with me!_" Eolis bellowed, his voice cutting through the din. Yes, we were commonly referred to as 'dead men' by the veterans on the rare occasion when one of them spoke to us directly. But even when they were not conversing with us, I would often hear the moniker come up in their conversations whenever the subject of new recruits arose.

The nine of us broke formation and followed Eolis into one of the nearby phantoms, accompanied by another handful of oronos. There were only two other astiros aboard, besides Eolis.

"Field Officer 'Neiasree has seen fit to grant me the honor of shadowing you throughout this first conflict," Eolis announced to the nine of us 'dead men', once the phantom sealed itself against the vacuum of space and began heading towards the hangar bay doors. Judging by his tone, though, he seemed to be adopting a rather sarcastic interpretation of the word 'honor'.

"Gratitude-" Heran, a short, quiet youth from southern Yermo, started to speak, but he was brutally silenced when Eolis planted a sharp kick in the younger warrior's stomach. Heran doubled over, clutching his belly as he fought to regain his breath. When Y'mir moved to help his comrade, Eolis stopped the outspoken islander with a withering glare.

I myself had been about to go to Heran's aid, but Y'mir had beaten me to it. After seeing the look on Eolis's face, thoughâ€"I am not ashamed to admit that I remained rooted to the spot.

"Do not mistake the meaning of my words," Eolis growled. "Your lives are nothing to me. I am not your Guardian; my orders are merely to observe you lot in battle and watch for signs of dishonor or cowardice. Whether you live or die is as trivial to me as an insect's views on life. So save your precious gratitude for the Godsâ€"most, if not all of you will be able to express it to them in person, soon enough."

The more senior oronos onboard the phantom traded glances with one another while the two astiros chuckled quietly under their breaths. As for the nine of usâ€"well, even our thoughts had been stilled by the astir's sobering words. It was not the first time someone had told us that we were all going to die, but this timeâ€"mere minutes before battleâ€"it seemed much moreâ€"unsettling.

I shook my head once and forced those squirming little emotions back down into the darkness. There was a time for thought and a time for action; this was the latter.

"Don't lose yourselves down there," one of the oronos murmured to us, speaking softly so that the astiros could not hear. "My first time, I could not quite believe that I was actually in a real battle, at first. It matters not how much training, how much preparation, how much conditioning you have received; it is the same for everyone. It's that sense of disbelief that will kill youâ€"Don't lose yourselves."

We were silent as our phantom streaked through the vacuum. I was able to spot dozens of the other dropships through the porthole, as well as a few of our vessels trading fire with Human ships. When I turned far to the side, though, I was able to see the planet towards which we were hurtling. We were very closeâ€"the planet filled most of the side of the porthole through which I was gazing.

Before long, the interior of the dropship began to rattle and vibrate, and the temperature started to climb. The heat was not unbearable, but it was not necessarily comfortable, either. It meant that we had reached the planet's atmosphere and were currently descending through its skies.

I could hear our pilot quietly conversing with his comrades over the battlenet, though it was difficult to see what kind of tactics the airmen were implementing from my perspective. All I could see were a handful of other dropships through my porthole, all of them falling through the skies like burning coals spilled from a brazier.

My stomach fluttered a tad bit as gravity established a firm hold over us. Our phantom began to tremor even more as the pilot increased the power of the engines in order to counter our acceleration towards the surface.

The older members of the crÃ"che were busying themselves by giving their weapons a final check, or just standing in a meditative silence. I'm sure they all had their own pre-battle rituals that they followed. I'm also sure that, in time, I would develop my own routines, but right now all I could do was hold my breath and wait.

The surface of the planet came up much faster than I was expecting.

One moment we were falling through the clouds, and the next we were suddenly about to crash into a sea of green treetops. Our pilot quickly leveled us out, and we soon found ourselves in the middle of a large formation of phantom dropships, weaving our way through the mountain peaks.

Within another few minutes, however, the mountains fell away, revealing a vast expanse of hills, meadows, and streams. A couple of rivers could be seen sparkling in the distance. As we sped towards these rivers, the sky all around us suddenly seemed to explode. Tiny streaks of fire, smoke, and light seared through the air past my porthole, prompting me to jerk back in alarm.

The more senior oronos fidgeted a little bit, but gave no other reaction to the hellstorm that had suddenly begun to hit us. Eolis and the two other astiros did not even acknowledge it. They must have been through it many, many times by now.

When I took another glance through the porthole, I saw one of our phantoms get struck by the anti-aircraft fire and brew up into flames, dropping out of the sky. That sent a quick surge of rage through me; some of our brothers would die before they even got the chance to fire their weapons.

Another phantom was hit, and I turned away from the porthole, not wanting to see any more of our comrades get incinerated.

"The Humans have concentrated their defenses in this area around a town, not far from here!" Eolis spoke loudly in order to be heard over the almost deafening explosions of the AA fire outside. "We are going to destroy that town and give the main forces a place to land!" he then turned to the nine of us new recruits and said, "Welcome to your grave."

After a few more moments, I could feel our dropship slowing down—we had reached our drop zone. The engines quieted down and the rhythm changed as the phantom's speed decreased.

"_On and on shall old war go, without respite my blood will flow_—" Y'mir murmured as the jump hatches in the sides of the troop bay slid open, exposing the interior of the dropship to the elements. Warm wind, produced from the speed of the phantom, rushed through the interior, forcing us to grab onto something so that we didn't lose our footing.

"O'er your eyes 'till they cannot see, the impossibility of victory," Oros finished. When I looked at the yellow-eyed desert-dweller, I think he'd only finished the verse more out of reflex than out of any sense of camaraderie with the islander.

Nevertheless, Y'mir gave a hum of appreciation. "You are learned in feudal poetry," the islander remarked. "Perhaps you are not so hopeless as I once thought—"

"I wish I could say the same," Oros's tone was as frosty as his response.

Whatever Y'mir would have said in reply was lost forever when our phantom came to a complete stop, hovering in midair over our drop zone. Eolis shouted at the top of his lungs for us to disembark.

"Out! Everyone out!"

I did not hesitate. I flexed my thigh muscles and crossed the troop bay in two strides, leaping out of the dropship and onto the ground below. I tucked my head in and went into a forward roll when I hit the dirt, absorbing the shock of my landing. When warrior crÃ"ches led the first wave of an assault, it was unofficial policy for our transports to drop us right in the middle of a hot zone. We did not get dropped off at a location that would allow us to regroup, establish a command post, and organize a measured assault against our enemiesâ€"such luxuries were reserved for the warriors of the combat legions, who had earned the right to be viewed as something on a higher level than cannon fodder.

As for us, we got dropped right in front of a concentration of Human defenses. I wondered briefly how the Humans had had the time to reinforce this area against our attack in so little timeâ€"perhaps ours was not the first force to assail them. But, in the end, exactly why the Humans seemed to be so prepared for us was irrelevant; all that mattered was that they were in our way.

I grasped my energy rifle and pulled it from my back, priming it.

We had been dropped in a clearing somewhere in a thick temperate forest. We had flown over one of the rivers I had spotted back when we emerged from the mountains, but there was still one more in front of us. I could faintly hear the noise of rushing water in the not-so-near distance. The town which we were moving against was supposedly located on the other side of that riverâ€"which meant we would eventually have to cross it.

Though I was far from an expert tactician, my thoughts on a situation like this were that speed was the key. Hit the enemy before they had a chance to consolidate their defenses, because we had to have taken them by some measure of surpriseâ€"I mean, who expects an opposing force to drop its first wave right in your kill zone?

The storm of weaponsfire that proceeded to pepper our clearing made me rethink that last assumption. Several of the smaller trees were actually sheared into pieces by the heavy weaponsfire.

I took one step towards the edge of the clearing and was immediately driven back several places when something slammed into my chest. My combat harness's energy shields flared as they absorbed the impact of the projectile. The wind was knocked out of me and I could already feel my flesh bruising up.

I shook my head several times and took a deep breath, forcing myself to concentrate.

I quickly saw that it was not a mere clearing that we had been dropped into; it was simply part of a much larger meadow. Behind my position, the bulk of the Q'Rumno had formed up and was charging straight into the forest at the meadow's edge. I gazed in the direction that everyone was heading in and caught sight of smaller, shadowy figures sprinting through the trees.

Humans.

I started sprinting across the meadow and plunged right into the

trees, gripping my rifle with both hands. The words of the warrior from my phantom swam into my consciousness as I charged right into the fray, how he had remarked that we would feel a certain sense of disconnect during our first fight.

Well, he had been right. While I leaped over tree roots and took cover behind trees to avoid the heavy weaponsfire of the Human defenses, it felt as if I was sitting in a dark room surrounded by a holotank, watching my body move almost of its own accord. I was thinking too much. I kept on thinking about how everything seemed soâ€rushed.

Five days ago, I had been in the heart of the Lhetae Mountains, hunting a snow manx. A week ago, I had been in Oenairem's capital city of Winter's Edge, visiting the Kaidon so that I would be given my final trials as a Proselyte. Two weeks ago, I had been living and training with my Guardian in the Crimson Hills, just like I had been doing for my entire life since I was five cycles old.

And look at where I am now. The past few weeks felt like one huge blurâ€ Maybe that was why everything felt unreal, to a certain degreeâ€there was no easing into combat, no grace period for a warrior to prepare himself physically and mentally for war. There was trainingâ€and then there was fighting. Nothing in between. Blinding darknessâ€and then equally blinding light.

Luckily, the feeling was not a permanent one. As I broke cover and ran towards a large rock formation, behind which several of my comrades waited for me, I was shot againâ€this time in the head. Again, my combat harness's energy shields took the hit for me, but I was still thrown to the ground from the impact of the metal projectile.

This was the second time I have been shot, so far. If not for our technology, I would have died twice, already. Having that kind of knowledge is one of the most sobering feelings I have ever experienced. That feeling of watching my body move on its own vanished into the ether, replaced by a polar opposite sensation of adrenaline-induced hyperactivity. Colors began to pop out in bright, vibrant detail. My hearts started beating faster than the wings of a green-tailed humming avias. Time itself even seemed to slow down slightly.

I rolled back to my feet and dove for cover behind the rock formation, alongside Oros, Heran, and a gray-eyed youth named Taire.

"Greetings, highlander!" Heran hollered as I joined them.

It took me a moment to remember that 'highlander' meant me. I returned the southerner's greeting with a quick nod. I remained behind the rocks for several moments, waiting for my energy shields to recharge. I could see the bar representing the status of my shields at the top of my HUDâ€overlayed on the eye lenses built into my helmetâ€as it slowly crept back towards the right.

This almost reminded me of all the times my Guardian and I had practiced with ranged weapons deep in the forest near where we lived. It had been in that forest where Uros 'Oenairemee had taught me how to use energy weaponryâ€energy pistols, energy rifles, focus

riflesâ€"my personal favoriteâ€"and grenade launchers, and many other kinds of energy weapons. It was his firm belief that training me in the ways of the swordsman was simply not enough; a good warrior had to go to battle with a good knowledge of a well-rounded assortment of weaponsâ€"not just the sword.

I would never even be given an energy sword, unless I somehow became an Ultra in the infantry. They weren't nearly as common as most people believed them to be.

It was due to this training that I was able to handle my energy rifle with confidence. Many other newly-recruited warriors ended up joining creche's without much knowledge of the operation of firearms; their training came during their first battle when they found themselves in a fight for survival with nothing to use but a weapon with which they had next to no experience.

I may not have been the best warrior from my home, but I was definitely one of the best-prepared. I knew exactly how to handle my rifle, how long it would last before it required a recharge, how I should fire in short bursts rather than in full automatic in order to preserve accuracy and charge, how I should always hold it with two hands in order to reduce recoil, etc. etc.

Though we had been under heavy fire from the moment we jumped out of the phantoms, it was nearly five or six minutes before I actually reached the Humans' defenses. They had been busyâ€"digging trenches in the ground, reinforcing them with earthen and wooden barriers from fallen trees. They only built these kinds of defenses at the tops of inclines and hills so that they always had the high groundâ€"that always meant more casualties for the attackersâ€"who just so happened to be us.

Perhaps their defenses were futileâ€"but they had been intelligently planned. Stillâ€"there was only so much fallen trees and dirt could do against the might of the Covenant military.

The Human was smallâ€"less than six feet tall. Humans as a whole were shorter than usâ€"slower and weaker, as well, both in technology and in body. The Human had short brown hair covering the top of its head, as well as its lower jaw and the area around its mouth. Yet another race of creatures with jaws instead of mandibles. Were we the only ones in the galaxy with the right kind of mouth?

That Human's faceâ€"its features, its flaws, its scarsâ€"was burned into my memory, for I was the one who destroyed it. I fired my rifle and watched the plasma charges catch the Human in the face, just below the helmet. It went down screaming, but fell silent before it hit the ground.

I felt nothing as I shifted my aim to the side, firing at another Human. This one had seen me take down its comrade, however, and was ready for me as a result. It fired its weapon at me, but I was able to evade the weaponsfire by rolling over to the side, taking cover behind a tree for a brief moment.

I noticed that the Humans' heavy weaponsfire had fallen silentâ€"our brothers must have neutralized their positions, wherever they had been. At least, that was my initial thought; I found myself advancing alongside Y'mir, Heran, and Taire a few seconds later, and when I

voiced my opinion of the Humans' heavy weapons to them, the islander shook his head.

"Nay, we have not destroyed their heavy guns," the green-eyed islander youth shook his head, firing off a quick burst from his rifle at the defenses which we were advancing against. "The Humans merely relocated them, moved them further back. Placed them among heavier fortifications, no doubt."

Before the islander could continue, however, I spotted something flying through the air out of the corner of my eye. When I turned to look at it, however, it had already thudded to the ground in front of the four of us. It bounced once and continued to roll. Though I only saw it for an instant, I knew instantly what it was from its shape.

"Cover!" I bellowed, hurling myself as far away as I could from the tiny little ball of death. I was able to see the others doing likewise for a brief moment before the Human grenade detonated, washing out my world with a pure white light and an intense ringing in my ears.

Gradually, my vision returned, and my hearing soon after. My armor and face was splattered with purple, and I frantically checked myself for wounds. I found none.

I then saw the bloodied stump of a severed arm lying on the ground in front of me, and I realized that the blood was not my own. It was one of the few remaining pieces of physical evidence that Taire 'Arralee had ever existed. While Y'mir, Heran, and I had been able to escape the blast, Taire had been too slow—the grenade had gone off right in front of him.

"_Damnation_!" I swore, shaking my head and wiping the purple blood from my face before any of it got in my mouth.

The weaponsfire had significantly subsided until we were left walking through the trees without challenge. The Humans had retreated. We reached the outer defenses and made our way through the trenches and woodworks. A good number of Humans had died behind these defenses, and their bodies littered the trenches.

I walked past the corpse of my first kill, that brown-haired specimen with the beard. It was not a particularly pleasant sight—the my plasma burst had burned away the better part of its cranium, exposing the charred remains of its brains. I stared down at the corpse dispassionately. I had been expecting some kind of reaction to killing my first Human. I don't know what exactly I thought I would feel—be it exhilaration, be it nausea, be it unease, be it satisfaction—

Instead, what I felt as I looked at that pathetic, broken thing that had once been a living, sentient creature, was nothing at all. The Human had not been worthy enough of a foe to make me feel positively, nor had it been worthy enough of my pity in any way, shape, or form to warrant a negative response. It was simply a creature who had been unfortunate enough to be in my line of fire. Killing the snow manx had taken lots of time and effort, but killing this Human had been nearly effortless. All it had taken was the squeeze of a trigger.

Any satisfaction I would later feel would not be due to the physical act of killing the Humans, though; it was more to do with the idea of cleansing the galaxy of those who would deny the Great Journey and defile the name of the Forerunners. Every kill I would make would rid the galaxy of one more heretic. That was something worth fighting for.

"_Mm,_ curious," Y'mir murmured, prodding another corpse with his toe as he allowed his rifle to ventilate. "I confess, I had been expecting more of a challenge"

"I'm sure Taire would have disagreed," Heran said, swallowing heavily as he glanced back in the direction where that grenade had transformed our comrade from a corporeal being to a bloodied memory.

"It was not the Humans who killed him," Oros, who had caught up with us from behind, interjected. The yellow-eyed Urassan was covered in purple spatter like me; Taire must not have been the only one unlucky enough to end his life next to a Human grenade. "It was the fool's nonexistent reflexes."

"I believe our opinions may be prematurely formed," I said as we rejoined the advance, heading deeper into the woods, moving ever closer to the river and the town beyond. "The Humans seemed to put little faith in these outer defenses; they gave them to us without much of a fight. But there is still much distance between us and their town. The Humans will care much more about holding onto the land further on ahead than they did about these shoddy failures that they call fortifications."

I believe my first battle has gotten off to a good start...but just that; a _start_. It had yet to reach its climax, and even longer to reach its conclusion. I could not shake the feeling that we still had yet to learn why so few of the oronos would survive to join the astiros, why the nine of us new recruits were not expected to see another day.

But at the same time, beneath all of the speculation, all of the emotions, there was a core of cold, hard logic. The logic was that even though the odds were stacked horribly against me, even though great peril lay ahead of me, ultimately, there was only one direction for me to continue going in, even if it meant my death.

Forward.

7. I Chapter 7: Heart of the Covenant

Chapter Seven: Heart of the Covenant

9**th**** Age of Reclamation, 13****th**** Cycle
>High Charity

**Uros**

Uros 'Oenairemee felt that it was only fitting that the armor of a Councilor was one of the most uncomfortable things he had ever worn.

The members of the High Council were arguably the most powerful individuals in the entire Covenant Empire, save for the three Hierarchs themselves, and the northerner believed that positions of power should never be comfortable to inhabit.

It was because of this belief that Uros did not mind having to wear the heavy, unwieldy headdress of a Councilor. He did not _enjoy_ it, obviouslyâ€|but he found reason not to complain about it.

The newest addition to the High Council had been offered a small estate in the Inner Circle, which he had accepted. The estate was not his aloneâ€"in truth, he was lucky to have a residence in the Inner Circle to begin with, being a foreigner to the Holy City. Normally, he would have been given a home in the Middle Districts, but one of the other Councilors had offered Uros a space in his own home, and Uros had accepted.

After all, getting a home in the Inner Circle was no small matter. But ultimately, Uros did not want to live alone. The time he spent alone after the death of his wife had instilled a deep desire for him to always have some form of companyâ€|and so when he was offered the chance to live with a fellow Councilor, he had accepted without hesitation.

Uros had gained transport to the Holy City aboard the _Sublime Transcendence_, which was the vessel of none other than Xytan 'Jar 'Wattinree, the Imperial Admiral of the Covenant Navy. After the violent death of Thanos 'Jar 'Kharreeve, the previous Imperial Admiral, 'Wattinree had been a rapidly rising star in the Navy, scoring victory after victory against the Humans with what scant forces he had at his disposal, until he had finally been given command over one of the largest Fleets in the Navy. He had been visiting Sanghelios for a brief shore leave before returning to his post, and Uros had managed to hitch a ride.

The Imperial Admiral's vessel had arrived at High Charity less than an hour ago, and Uros 'Oenairemee was just entering the city now. He rode aboard a tiny, two-man transport shuttle, used primarily for ferrying individuals of importance, such as a member of the High Council.

The Outer Ring of High Charity comprised mostly of dense residential sectors and industrial compounds. Though there were no citizens of the Holy City who could be considered 'poor', those who inhabited the Outer Ring were noticeably much closer to being poor than those who lived closer to the heart of the city.

Beyondâ€"or rather, _behind_â€"the Outer Ring were the Middle Districts, which were a pleasant mix of urban sprawl and suburban residential areas. Many of the districts had their own unique subculturesâ€"after all, a good number of the inhabitants of these districts and their ancestors have been living there for several millennia. One also had to take into account the sheer size of the city; the individual districts usually rivaled the Sanghelian States in size and population. The Middle Districts were primarily home to the vast majority of the San 'Shyuum population of High Charity, which numbered over twenty-three million. That alone should give a good indication of the true size of the Middle Districts, and the city as a whole. Uros hoped he would have enough time during a typical day to visit these districts; he had already begun to hear

many interesting stories about several of these district-states.

At the very heart, the very centre of High Charity was the Dreadnought—a vessel that had once belonged to the Forerunners. It had been left by the Gods on the old homeworld of the Prophets. When the Prophets uncovered the vessel, a civil war inevitably broke out over the usage of the ship, pitting two factions against each other; one faction that refused to enter the vessel, and another that desired to explore it. Eventually, the faction that was in favor of exploring the vessel and uncovering its secrets boarded the Dreadnought and abandoned the homeworld, which was later destroyed when its sun went supernova.

A large chunk of the homeworld's crust had been blasted into space when the Dreadnought took to the skies. Over time, it had been shaped and molded into the partial planetoid that formed the dome of High Charity. The city would be built inside over a period of several centuries. After the war between the San 'Shyuum and the Sangheili ended, resulting in the formation of the Covenant, the Dreadnought's weapons were disabled and it was installed into the partially-constructed High Charity, where it still stands today, providing power to the entire planetoid.

The Dreadnought was also most likely the most important religious site in the Covenant Empire, and it was explored and maintained by an order of San 'Shyuum Ascetics, headed by the Philologist. It was truly a wonder to behold—tetrahedral in shape, easily eight or nine miles in height, with thousands of rooms, corridors, and secrets that most in the Covenant would never know of. It loomed over the entire city, visible from any location in High Charity.

The Inner Circle was the smallest part of the Holy City. It was inhabited by the more powerful members of society; government officials, members of the High Council, and wealthy citizens, mostly. This part of the city was the small, circular, elevated tier that surrounded the Dreadnought. It was only appropriate that the most prestigious part of the city was the area closest to its heart.

There were other parts of High Charity, as well; the Upper Reaches, the Wall, and the Stalk—the Stalk was the name given to the colossal mass of towers and docking bays that hung below the base of the upper dome of the planetoid. And then there were the Fields, which were massive, methane-rich fields located far beneath the city; the millions of Unggoy who lived in High Charity dwelled there. None of the other races of the Covenant usually ventured into the Fields, however; the Sangheili and San 'Shyuum remained mostly in the city, along with a few communities of Kig-yar and Lekgolo colonies who dwelt in the Outer Ring.

It took the shuttle nearly half an hour to reach the Inner Circle at its top speed. Though the artificial 'star' at the apex of the planetoid's dome provided the city with a day/night cycle, the Inner Circle was rarely ever dark. Bright orbs of many different colors of light floated around the Inner Circle, following the artificial wind currents that circulated around the base of the Dreadnought. The orbs were not actual constructs of pure light, obviously—they were self-sustaining pods filled with some kind of luminescent gas; there was a different gas for each different color.

Lanterns dangled from wires in the streets, as well, adding to the light display. Each dwelling seemed to be able to black out its windows, however, allowing the residents within some measure of darkness and peace from the lights, if they so desired.

The pilot of the shuttle activated the comm and conferred with an official at one of the transport hubs before he brought the craft in for a landing. "Here is your stop, Councilor," the pilot gave a quick bow of respect to his passenger after he touched down and opened the ramp.

Uros thanked the pilot, grateful that the man hadn't called him by some ridiculous honorific. Many of the top-ranking officials preferred to be called 'eminence', or 'excellence', or some other fancy, illustrious title. Uros preferred the simple title of Councilor. The position was prestigious enough in its own right; there was no need to embellish it.

After he pulled the satchel containing his personal effects over his shoulder, the Councilor crossed over to the other side of the landing pad and walked down the ramps into the transportation hub. He exchanged greetings with the citizens who were already present, going about their day-to-day affairs. The inhabitants of the Inner Circle were a nice blend of San 'Shyuum and Sangheili, unlike the primarily San 'Shyuum-inhabited Middle Districts.

Not all of the San 'Shyuum gave Uros a greeting of respect, but they were not obligated to do so, being Prophets. However, a fair number of them went ahead and greeted him respectfully anyway, the Councilor noted with content. But while only some of the Prophets greeted him, all of the Sangheili who passed him by were sure to pay him the respect that was due to a member of the High Council.

Uros could have easily gotten transportation from the hub to his new home, but he felt in the mood to walk, and the distance was not a far one. While the Inner Circle was home to the most wealthy and powerful citizens of High Charity, many of the lesser San 'Shyuum—their low-level civilians—came into the Circle during certain parts of the day in order to man streetside kiosks, entertainment venues, and many other attractions. It was these street attractions that contributed heavily to the high life status of the Inner Circle.

The Councilor passed by two young San 'Shyuum performing an intricate dance while juggling flaming axes. He passed by a strip of professional theatres—some of them sporting the comedies and tragedies of San 'Shyuum drama, or pieces of the much more abstract Sangheili Egara theatre. He passed vendors selling all sorts of foods and trinkets; Uros decided not to purchase anything, however, until he was walking the streets just for the sake of walking the streets. Right now, he had a place to be.

The environment of the Inner Circle was unlike any other city Uros had ever visited. While the Circle's communes had a nice blend of Sangheili and San 'Shyuum residents, the Circle itself was a blend of light urban sprawl and natural environments. Rivers, streams, and creeks flowed freely through the city, resulting in a large number of bridges that Uros ended up crossing. A few species of birds and small mammals also roamed the streets, usually near the rivers and trees—High Charity's environmental habitats had a fair number of fauna imported from the myriad worlds of the Covenant Empire, but

none of them were of the overly predatory sort.

There were also many areas of forest. In some places, Uros walked down a street with a strip of shops, homes, or some other type of building on one side—while the other side of the street was the edge of the woods. One could literally cross from the city to the forest in a few steps.

One could not think of the Inner Circle as a ring-shaped city to understand its layout—rather, one would have to think of it as a patchwork of moderate to densely-populated urban neighborhoods separated by the forests.

Uros's new home was not located in a community, however. It was located in the Blessed Silver Woods, just inward of the Yhire Commune, near the Western Radius. The estate was situated in a small neighborhood of sorts, comprising of over a dozen homes; all of them spread throughout the fringe of the woods. The walk from the outskirts of the Yhire Commune to this neighborhood took Uros less than ten minutes.

The Councilor glanced at his holo-pad briefly as he neared the homes, making sure he had the address correct. With the address fresh in his mind, Uros passed by the first, second, and third homes before coming to a stop in front of the fourth. It was a smaller, single-story, wooden house that had been built on top of a short knoll. A tall, Bluewood Cey tree grew in the front yard, towering over all of the lesser trees of the Blessed Silver Woods that surrounded it. Though it was nighttime at the moment, the neighborhood was illuminated by several of those floating orbs of light, casting many different shadows on the ground, shadows that never seemed to stop moving, even if their sources were inanimate.

The homes were all linked to a small gravel road by dirt pathways. Uros walked up the short path to the front door and rapped three times on the lacquered wood with his knuckles, waiting patiently for a response. The Councilor heard light footsteps from within for a few moments before the handle turned and the door swung open, revealing a dark gray-skinned man around Uros's own age. His eyes were a vibrant blue, in contrast with his skin color, and under his left eye was a crescent-shaped line of scar tissue.

The blue-eyed man blinked once and said, "Uros 'Oenairemee?"

"The one and only," Uros replied.

The owner of the house broke out into a wide grin and gave a deep, booming laugh. "I had to see and hear it with my own eyes and ears before I was convinced! The fortune of such an occurrence seemed much too good to be true."

By now, Uros was finding something maddeningly familiar about the other man; the eyes, the voice, and definitely the laugh seemed to strike a chord in his memory. "I am certain you are known to me, but I confess the memories are elusive—"

"The Fleet of Harmonious Exaltation?" the blue-eyed Councilor prompted Uros, trying to jog his memory. "Back during the last crusade against the Heretics? We served in the same battlegroup, remember?"

That was when the memories clicked perfectly into place. Uros finally remembered where he had heard that voice, heard that laugh before. "Ouranâ€| Ouran 'Inzaunumeeâ€|" Uros's own mandibles twitched back in a slight grin as he clasped forearms with his former comrade. "I did not know you were a member of the High Council! They are letting just about anybody into their ranks, aren't they?"

Ouran gave another chuckle, standing aside so that Uros could enter the house. "Indeed, luckily for you," he chuckled, closing the door behind his old comrade in arms. He then brushed past Uros and ducked into the kitchen. "I just pulled a cut of jhala ribs out of the oven. Please, join me for dinner."

"Dinner?" Uros arched a brow. "At this hour of the night?"

Ouran blinked once. "You will soon find that your meals are more in tune with your schedule as a Councilor, not with the time of day. And besides, I make it a point never to go to a conclave on an empty stomach."

"There is a conclave tonight?"

"Indeed," Ouran nodded. "The timing of your arrival has been quite perfect. Not only can you attend this next conclave, but you are also in time for dinner. Quite perfect timingâ€| Of course, I am certain that you will not be expected to attend this conclave, considering the fact that you only just arrivedâ€|"

"I will be there," Uros replied without hesitation.

Ouran opened the oven, looking away to avoid the blast of heat. He slipped on a pair of oven gloves and pulled the pan out, setting it on the marble counter. The aroma of the ribs filled the room, and Uros's stomach growled as the Councilor remembered how hungry he was. The blue-eyed man glazed the ribs over with sauce one last time before slicing them into manageable pieces and placing them on dining slabs, which he set onto the tableâ€|one for him, and another for Uros.

Uros cut into the ribs, taking in the savory smells of the meat before eating. "It has been too long since I have tasted real cooking," he grunted in between bites.

"Gratitude," Ouran said in reply. "Though surely it cannot surpass the cooking of your wife?"

The mention of his wife sent a small pang through Uros's hearts, and he slowed in his eating. "Rhea passed away twenty cycles ago," Uros informed his old friend. "It was her genes that killed herâ€| There was nothing to be done."

"_Damnation_â€|" Ouran swore under his breath. "Apologies, old friendâ€| Iâ€|"

"Think nothing of it," Uros gave a dismissive wave of his hand. "We have not had contact with one another since the old days; you had no way of knowing."

Ouran rose from his chair and opened one of his cupboards, producing

a bottle of aged thax. He poured a small amount of the liquor into two equally small glasses, sliding one across the table. He sealed the bottle and put it back in the cupboard before raising his glass. "To Rhea," he toasted somberly. "May you one day be reunited among the stars."

"I nearly killed myself with alcohol after her death, and I have not consumed very much sinceâ€|but that is something worth drinking to," Uros murmured, raising his glass as well and clinking it against his old friend's. They both downed the thax and returned to the meal.

Ouran thankfully decided to turn the conversation to lighter matters. "I confess, I did not know of your identity until very recently," he told Uros. "All I had been informed of was that there was a new Councilor arriving straight from 'Oenairem State. I volunteered to provide you with quarter mostly because I have grown weary of living in an empty house, and the fact that the new Councilor was a fellow highlanderâ€| Would you believe that you and I are the only northerners on the High Council?"

"Pity for them," Uros chuckled. "I am sure being stuck with one highlander was torture enough; now they are blessed with two."

* * *

><p>Though most members of the High Council dwelled in the Inner Circle, their conclaves were held in the Council Chamber, which was located in the Upper Reaches. The Reaches comprised mostly of the giant world rooms that resembled parts of Sanghelios, Doisac, and Janjur Qomâ€"the homeworlds of the Sangheili, Jiralhanae, and San 'Shyuum, respectivelyâ€"as well as the Nexus, which served as the seat of power of the Covenant leadership. The Council Chamber was located in the Nexus, along with the Sanctum, which was the living space of the three Hierarchs. There were many other places of interest located in the Nexus, but the Council Chamber was the only one that held any relevance toward Uros.<p>

Ouran walked with Uros through the Blessed Silver Woods and back into the Yhire Commune, where he acquired transportation to the Upper Reaches. They arrived on the landing pad a few minutes later, along with dozens of other Councilors and their transports. They all filed into the Council Chamber through the giant hall, taking their seats.

The chamber looked almost like a stadium; there was a large, central aisle, with the Councilors' seats on the tiers on either side of the aisle. At one end of the chamber was the way back out to the landing pads and the city beyond. At the other end was the entrance to the Sanctum of the Hierarchs, and it was from that end that the Hierarchs would address the Council.

And in the center of the aisle was a podium from which an individual would address the High Council. Currently standing there was a tall, muscular, dark-skinned, orange-eyed man clad in the golden armor of a Zealot. A Fleetmaster, no doubt.

Uros and Ouran took the side corridors in order to reach their seats, which were situated in the highest, furthest back tier. It mattered little where a Councilor sat, but Ouran seemed to prefer having more

of a bird's-eye view of the proceedings, caring little for being up in the forefront.

The blue-eyed man gave a low grunt after he took his seat, pointing down towards the opposite end of the hall. "See the Honor Guards?" he said to Uros, pointing at the handful of warriors clad in armor of crimson and gold who were standing at attention in front of the entrance that led to the Sanctum. "When the Honor Guards show up, the Hierarchs are usually close behind."

Uros looked back down at the zealot standing on the oration platform. "That man must be very good at his job, then, to warrant the Hierarchs' attention."

"Or perhaps the opposite," Ouran countered. "While it does not happen very often, commanders who suffer catastrophic failures are condemned to death in this very room. This man could be guilty of such an offense—it is never possible to tell; promotion and execution would yield opposite emotions, but no self-respecting Fleetmaster would allow any of them to show. But I doubt this is an execution—this man is familiar to me."

The lights in the chamber dimmed ever so slightly, leaving a bright beam of light shining down on the oration platform and its occupant.

The Ultra in charge of the contingent of Honor Guards present in the chamber called for everyone to rise. Uros got up from his seat, craning his neck to get a view of the entrance to the Sanctum. The doors hissed open and the three High Prophets emerged from within, ensconced in their hovering gravity thrones.

"Truth, Mercy, and Regret," Ouran murmured to Uros. "Our three living gods."

Uros glanced at his compatriot briefly, sensing the sarcasm in Ouran's remark. He considered exploring his friend's opinion of the Hierarchs, but decided to wait until after the conclave. The council chamber was not a good place to discuss such matters.

The Prophet of Truth, who sat in the middle of the triumvirate, was the one to begin the conclave. He lifted a hand, and the din of voices that filled the chamber quickly died down and vanished. The Councilors and Lesser Prophets sat back down. "I call the council to order," the High Prophet declared in his honeyed tones. "We shall begin with the esteemed Fleetmaster."

"Kneel," the Prophet of Mercy, the oldest of the three, commanded. The Zealot standing on the oration platform obeyed, going down on one knee.

"Name yourself, sans your current command position," Truth ordered.

"I am Thel 'Vadamee, son of Eiwe 'Vadamee," the Zealot stated. "Zealot of the Navy, your humble servant."

Truth gave Mercy a quick nod, and the oldest of the Hierarchs proceeded to give the Fleetmaster his oaths. The elderly Prophet recited charge after charge, to which the Fleetmaster would

frequently give responseâ€"affirmative or negative, depending on what each individual charge was. This went on for a short while; Fleetmasters receiving promotions to Supreme Commander did not happen very often, so it was acceptable for the charges of office to be somewhat rigorous and lengthy.

The fact that the charges were being delivered by none other than a Hierarch and in full view of the entire High Council certainly did not alleviate the stress of the ordeal.

Uros, personally, who had heard how stressful it was to go through one of these proceedings, was not impressed. This had nothing to do with the merit of the Fleetmaster receiving the promotion; it was simply directed towards the ceremony itself. All he saw was a man answering questions. Uros had seen his friend Niro suffer through the Induction ceremony that resulted in his ascension to Kaidon of Ovarum State; the proceedings in this chamber could not compare with the pain that Niro had endured. And so, Uros was not impressed with the ceremony.

Rather than watch the soon-to-be Supreme Commander, Uros instead observed the three Hierarchs. He had always been adequate at judging a person's character by observing them over short periods of time, and he now tested this skill on the High Prophets.

The Prophet of Regret, who had not spoken at all during the proceedings, was the youngest of the three, and he looked utterly bored. He did not seem to enjoy the formal nature of conclavesâ€"he had probably ascended to the rank of Hierarch from a much more hands-on position. As for the Prophet of Mercy, he seemed to be extremely knowledgeable in the intricacies of the law and the traditions of the Covenant, but he lacked the charisma needed to lead an empire on his own. He struck Uros as a highly intelligent individual with his head in the clouds.

But Uros had no problem with either of them. They were easy to readâ€"their personalities were laid bare by their behavior, by their mannerisms, by their movements, by their speech.

The Prophet of Truth, howeverâ€"Uros instinctively knew that Truth was the most dominant of the three because he could glean nothing outright from observing the Hierarch. Truth's mouth was curved in a faint ghost of a grin, but it was not a real smile; simply a facial expression that had been rehearsed time and time again. His eyes almost gleamed with a subtle intelligence. Everything about the High Prophet was calm, collected, and under a tight level of control.

"He's a schemer, that one," Ouran had noticed Uros's scrutiny, nodding in the direction of the Prophet of Truth. "Never can tell what goes on in that mind of hisâ€"

The Prophet of Mercy gave the final charge, which the Fleetmaster answered calmly and without hesitation.

Truth took the lead once more. "You have taken your oaths to the Covenant and to me, and they will bind you until death or dishonor claim you. Now rise, Supreme Commander 'Vadamee."

There was a smattering of applause that rang throughout the chamber,

coming mostly from the side of the Councilors. The Lesser Prophets did not seem to follow the proceedings with very much interestâ€”their interests lay more with the religious and non-military aspects of the government.

"You shall be given command of the Fleet of Particular Justice," Truth declared. Now, that was something of a big deal, seeing as the Fleet of Particular Justice was one of the most powerful fleets in the navy. Having command of that fleet being given to a newly-promoted Supreme Commander was certainly seemed unusual.

Uros glanced at Ouran once more, but this time his friend's expression was unreadable. Whatever the other man had to say about the matter, he was not going to say it now.

After the Supreme Commander was dismissed, the Council turned its attention to more common, day-to-day affairs. At some point during the proceedings, Uros was announced as the newest addition to the High Council, and he had to stand before the Hierarchs and swear his own oaths of office. But again, he did not feel overly stressed or nervous; it was nothing compared to the hells he had endured when he first joined the military. Before he knew it, he had finished his oaths, and was allowed to return to his seat.

There were reports from several different officials and Councilors concerning the state of the economy, as well as relations between the different races of the Covenant. Occasionally there would be heat between the Sangheili and Jiralhanae that required the attention of the High Council, but most of the issues arose from conflict between the Unggoy and Kig-yar, or the Yanme'e and the Huragok.

It was not until much later, when one of the Lesser Prophets announced that new Forerunner relics had been discovered on another world inhabited by Humans, that Uros's interest was sparked.

"A world the Humans call 'Eden'," the Lesser Prophet was explaining. "Multiple high-level artifacts have been detected by the luminaries of our scout ships. Under orders of the Imperial Admiral, the Fleet of Righteous Fervor has been dispatched to this world in order to excavate the artifacts andâ€¦deal with its population."

"The new Minister of Tranquility," Ouran murmured to Uros as the Lesser Prophet continued to speak. "Uptight little worm, he isâ€¦not half the Minister his predecessor was."

"What happened to him?" Uros asked.

"Who?"

"His predecessor."

"Ahâ€¦" Ouran gave a light shrug, turning his attention back to the conclave. "Disappeared over a month ago. Killed when the ship he was on was destroyed in one of our previous skirmishes with the Human navy. Shame, reallyâ€¦"

The conclave stretched well into the following morning, and Uros was fighting a losing battle against his exhaustion by the time the Hierarchs departed and the High Council was dismissed.

"I will admit, today's conclave went a little longer than most usually do," Ouran yawned as the two Councilors boarded their transport and began to make the lengthy trip back to the Yhire Commune. "Normally, we just vote on passing or striking legislations, or we rule on sanctions against one of the lesser races for their conflicts with one another... Promotions do not occur very often."

"The new Ministerâ€¦he mentioned that the Fleet of Righteous Fervor was the one dispatched to the Human world?" Uros asked.

"Indeed," Ouran said in reply. "This holds significance with you?"

"With you, as well," Uros nodded. "Righteous Fervor is Niro's Fleet."

The other Councilor glanced at 'Oenairemee, his own curiosity piqued. "Is it, now?"

"Truly."

"I'd always wondered what had become of himâ€¦ It would seem we have more to discuss on the morrow, after you rest up."

Uros had stopped listening, though, as he sank deep into his own thoughts. Yes, Righteous Fervor was the fleet that was being commanded by his old friend Niro 'Ovarumeeâ€¦but it was also the fleet to which the Q'Rumno Warrior Creche was attached. The Councilor knew that at this very moment, on a faraway world, Aten 'Oenairemee was fighting for his life as a new addition of the creche's oronos.

Uros remained silent for the rest of the flight. During the walk back through the woods to Ouran's home, he traded a few light stories with his old friend, but did not get caught up in prolonged conversations; he was too tired.

When the two Councilors returned home, Ouran bid Uros a good rest before heading out into the dense woods behind the house, vanishing into the trees. Uros retired to his bedchamber, slipping out of his armor and the bulky Councilor's helm. Before he went to bed, he decided to quickly unpack his satchel, and he spent the next few minutes putting his personal effects in appropriate places around the room.

After he pulled out the last objectâ€¦a colony of crystals from the underwater caverns off the Golden Coast of Ahras that glowed faintly with every color of the rainbowâ€¦he frowned when he saw that his satchel was not yet empty. Nestled in the bottom of the satchel was a small piece of paper. When he picked it up, Uros was certain that he had never placed it inside his bag. His certainty was confirmed when he read the words that had been scrawled upon it. Someone had written tomorrow's date, along with a short message.

Ied Unnel Theatre. Ceulaimon District. Noon. Come alone.

Chapter Eight: Gamble With Fate

9**th**** Age of Reclamation, 13****th**** Cycle
>Human World - "Eden", Unknown
System

**Niro**

"Shipmaster, the dropships have been deployed," Uilar 'Tahamee reported from the tactical station.

And now the fun beginsâ€¦ the Shipmaster thought to himself. He rose from his chair and gave Uilar an acknowledging nod. He turned his attention back to the viewscreen, watching the Human navy scramble to form a barrier between the Covenant fleet and the planet.

The Shipmaster often wondered if the Humans really knew how futile their situation was. He only wondered this because every time the Humans faced the fleet, their zeal in battle never seemed to diminish. Was it desperation that continued to motivate them in battle, or sheer defiance? Or perhaps both?

No matter. All Niro had to do was destroy them; not wonder about what fueled them.

The _Sacrosanct,_ along with every other vessel in the fleet, had been brought up to full combat readiness the moment it had dropped out of the Nether. And now, that combat readiness was about to be put to the test once again.

"Orders are coming in from the _Sacred Flame,_" Ni'ram 'Teharolee, the officer manning the communications station, informed the Shipmaster. "The Fleetmaster is ordering us into formation."

"As he wills it, so it shall be," Niro nodded, stepping down into the level space between the command platform and the forward viewscreen, standing right next to the helm station. "Helm, come about to new heading one-seven-five by negative zero-one-zero. Put us under the _Star of Midnight,_ then return to prime heading."

Eyom 'Nelasee, the helmsman, did not even bother replying to the command. After serving with 'Nelasee for nearly six cycles, Niro no longer needed acknowledgement from the quiet officer, who rarely spoke unless he was making course corrections.

Niro then turned back to his second-master, circling around the command platform, walking past the tactical station, and standing in front of the holotank that occupied the rear half of the bridge. "Heat lines One and Two," he ordered Uilar as he activated the holotank over the round command table. A holographic representation of Eden sprang into existence, with blue stars representing the myriad ships of the Fleet of Righteous Fervor and red spheres representing the Human ships. It was a three-dimensional projection, which allowed Niro to walk all the way around the table in order to adjust his perspective.

Niro stared closely at the formation of red blips. He reached out and touched a pair of the red dot-like representations of the Human ships, and they both pulsed yellow once. "Weapons, I want firing

solutions on those two ships," he added. "Hold fire until ordered otherwise."

"Your will," Uilar murmured in reply as he made the appropriate calculations.

"Operations, what's the status on the damage control parties?" the Shipmaster asked.

Sesa 'Yeromee peered at his console, inputting a handful of inquiries before replying, "Damage control parties have reported to their stations and are awaiting further orders."

I pray they receive none, Niro continued to think to himself. The Shipmaster really, _really_ did not want his ship to take too much damage—|not after nearly losing everything in the last naval conflict he had taken part in. If he had to take the _Sacrosanct_ into drydock twice in a row—|

Raviq 'Jhalloree served as Shipmaster of the _Midnight Star_. He also commanded the battlegroup of which the _Sacrosanct_ was a part. The formation was centered around the _Midnight Star_,_ which was a CPV-class Heavy Destroyer—|one of the more powerful ship classes in the navy.

While he stood at the holotank, Niro joined the comm link that had been established between the _Midnight Star_ and the other ships in the battlegroup. It allowed 'Jhalloree to have instant communication with each of his subordinate Shipmasters. It only linked the Shipmasters to 'Jhalloree, however; it did not link them to each other—|that would be much too chaotic. If Niro wished to contact another ship, he would have to open a new channel.

The comm link crackled at that moment, and an image of 'Jhalloree appeared on the surface of the holotank table. "_Shipmaster 'Ovarumee,_" he bowed his head and clasped his fist to his hearts in a salute, which Niro promptly returned. "_Orders have come in from the Fleetmaster. We are all to rain a coordinated cleansing fire on the Humans from long range. I am painting your target—|"

Niro's mandibles nearly twitched in irritation, but he was able to suppress the urge at the last moment. He already had firing solutions on two targets—|it always irked him when he was forced to change his battle plans at the last moment.

After 'Jhalloree ended his transmission, Niro sent Uilar the updated targeting information. Uilar felt a similar surge of irritation, but he, too, did not allow it to show. He simply canceled the previous firing solutions he had been working on and started plotting a new one for the Human ship that the Shipmaster had painted for him.

Niro stared at the rapidly-closing gap between the blue stars and the red spheres for several long seconds. He then turned back to face the viewscreen, watching the advancing Human navy.

"Firing solution complete," Uilar said to Niro after he finished his task.

"Lock solution into the targeting computer and fire on my command," Niro ordered.

"Already done," Uilar replied, though Niro could sense a barely perceptible edge of impatience brimming under his second-master's words. _I have been doing this for over ten cycles; I know the routine_.

Much as Niro would have agreed with the thoughts going through Uilar's mind, there was a protocol that had to be followed, and the second-master understood this as well as any warrior.

Niro was grateful for the fact that he did not have to wait very long at all for the order to open fire. There was still a fair distance between the Covenant Fleet and the opposing force of Humans; Fleetmaster 'Ahrmonree was cutting it close, but there were others who would have prodded Fate even further.

The order to fire was not picked up by the comm officer; instead, it was sent directly to the Shipmaster. "Fire lines One and Two," Niro ordered.

"Lines One and Two, aye!" Uilar slammed his fist down onto one of the icons on his console even before Niro had finished talking. "Torpedoes away, signal locks have been acquir-

"_New contact, new contact!_" 'Nelasee exclaimed suddenly, cutting the second-master off midsentence. "Bearing one-five-five"correction: one-six-zero, twenty thousand kilometers distant, on a trajectory perpendicular to our own" |"

Niro's forehead contorted severely in a deep frown, and his mandibles twitched once as he abandoned the holotank and strode back up to the front of the bridge, standing right in front of the main viewscreen. "Give me a visual," he ordered sharply as he moved, forcing his voice to keep calm.

The view of the main viewscreen shifted to the left and magnified several times. Sure enough, the Human navy had clustered together in a tighter formation, but something was wrong; there was a giant"thing"drifting towards the Human ships. It was definitely some kind of space station"most likely a refit station. But it was not the station itself that was causing a ruckus; it was the station's _trajectory_.

"By the Gods, it's moving right into the path of our salvo" |" 'Teharolee murmured as the realization of the station's intent dawned on him.

Niro remained firmly rooted to the spot, watching silently as the dozens of crackling plasma torpedoes slammed into the Human space station. There was a blinding explosion of white that forced the bridge crew to avert their eyes. When the light faded, all that remained of the space station were a few glowing fragments of semi-molten metal, spinning away into the void. And behind it"the Human navy continued to advance, having evaded the Covenant fleet's opening salvo.

Niro knew what would be coming next, and he was already shouting orders, abandoning all pretense of remaining calm in front of his crew. "Boost power to forward shields!" he bellowed. "Have damage control parties on standby!"

Before the Shipmaster could issue any further orders, the Human navy opened fire. Niro was sure the sound of all those magnetic cannons opening fire at the same time would have been absolutely deafening; thankfully, it was impossible to hear the sound through the vacuum of outer space. Unfortunately, the sound of one of the dense metal projectiles slamming into the _Sacrosanct_ was easily heard by everyone onboard.

It felt like someone had clubbed the ship with a practice stave; the bridge shook violently, forcing the officers to grip their consoles and chairs in order to avoid getting dashed against the bulkhead. Niro, unfortunately, had been standing up at the time. He was thrown onto the floor, barely avoiding braining himself on the helmsman's console.

The lights flickered and went out, plunging the bridge into darkness for a few moments before the red backup lights were activated, casting the chamber in a hellish glow. The officers were all shouting out their own situation reports and status updates, and Niro was forced to tune most of them out. His most pressing concerns were to get the _Sacrosanct_ back on course, and to power the weapons systems back up in time for another salvo.

"Helm, get us back on course!" Niro shouted, picking himself back up off the floor.

"We've taken a direct hit," Sesa 'Yeromee, the operations officer, reported, analyzing the consequences of the impact. "Impact has spun us significantly off courseâ€¦ We have lost life support in the forward sections of decks eight through eleven. Minor hull breaches have been detected."

"Evacuate all nonessential personnel from those areas, seal off the breached sections, and be ready to seal off the rest if needed. I want damage control parties on those breaches immediately," Niro said to the operations officer before turning away from the viewscreen and returning to his chair. "Weapons!" he spoke loudly so that he could be heard by his second-master. "Dump plasma from the auxiliary coils into the starboard lateral banks! Heat lines Two, Four, and Six, and have the pulse lasers in reserve!"

"Heat lines Two, Four, and Six, aye," Uilar echoed, already in the process of diverting the energy required to make that order become a reality.

Niro could not see the full effects of the Humans' surprise barrage, but he knew that it had caused some major havoc in the fleets formation and organization. When he glanced at the status of his battlegroup, he saw that the organized formation had been scattered, and three ships had been destroyed. Upon closer inspection, Niro saw that one of the destroyed vessels had been the _Midnight Star_â€"Shipmaster 'Jhalloree's vesselâ€¦leaving his battlegroup leaderless.

"_Damnation_â€¦" the Shipmaster swore under his breath.

After the two opening salvos, the battle lost any sense of cohesion as the Covenant ships simply attacked the Human formation without any regard for organized tactics. The sad truth of it all was that even

when a Covenant fleet did not use tactics and simply charged headfirst into a Human meatgrinderâ€¦normally the Covenant fleet would still emerge victorious. In space, the technology gap between the two opposing navies was simply too great.

Stillâ€¦ Niro had been a Shipmaster for a long time, and he was loath to yield to the unorganized chaos that was taking place outside of his bridge. He rose from his chair and headed back to the holotank table, which was still active from its earlier use, displaying the naval battle in its entirety with holographic representations. "Comm, contact theâ€¦" the Shipmaster glanced briefly at four of the nearest vessels that remained from 'Jhalloree's battlegroup- "â€¦the _Acolyte,_ the _Breath of Life,_ the _Mourning Soul,_ and the _Fervent Resolve_. Tell them to form up behind us and assume attack pattern Serix-Five."

"Serix-Five, aye," 'Teharolee worked at fever pitch to open several different channels between the _Sacrosanct_ and the other four ships. "Transmissions have been sent, receiving confirmation..."

The specific pattern that the Shipmaster indicated involved five ships assuming a pyramid-shaped formationâ€¦the leading vessel, in this case the _Sacrosanct_, would be the ship at the pyramid's apex, while the other four ships took up covering positions behind it, forming the other corners of the pyramid. The formation had been named after the serix, which was a species of bird-of-prey native to Sanghelios. They often flew in an identical pattern when traveling in small flocks.

"The others are moving into position," 'Teharolee declared.

Niro studied the Human navy's line for a few moments. They were taking a good mauling at the hands of the disorganized Covenant ships, but they were somehow still holding their position. Time to change that.

The Shipmaster reached out and selected a portion of the Humans' position that seemed to be one of the weaker points. The area flashed once as the Shipmaster touched it. Niro then gave the coordinates to 'Teharolee, who promptly relayed them to the other four ships in the formation.

"Helm, new heading one-four-two, all ahead full," Niro ordered. "We shall present the Humans with our starboard launchers... Operations, work on boosting the starboard lateral shields as much as possible. Siphon power from life support systems if you must. Weapons, I want a firing solution on this vesselâ€¦" the Shipmaster sent Uilar the coordinates of a larger Human ship that was located right near the point where Niro would drive his formation through the enemy line.

"Shipmaster, our reactor's temperature levels are climbing into the red," 'Yeromee reported. "Lightest of All says that the coolant systems were jarred by that last hit; we need to ease off on the engines."

"Acknowledged," Niro replied. "Maintain current speed."

The Shipmaster returned to his chair, watching the rapidly-approaching Human navy through the viewscreen, his gaze fixed

on the point of their line which his formation was heading into. Once the _Sacrosanct_ came within range of its targets, Niro gave the order to fire.

"Firing lines Two, Four, and Sixâ€|" Uilar echoed. The red backup lights flickered momentarily as the plasma was shaped and released. "Torpedoes away, signal lock acquiredâ€|waitâ€|" the second-master's frown was evident in the way his tone drastically changed. "The torpedoes are losing cohesionâ€|"

The Shipmaster was out of his chair and at the second-master's side in a flash, seeing for himself what was happening with the torpedoes. When he took a quick glance at the viewscreen, he could see that they were losing their shape.

"It is the debris from that space station that took our opening salvo," Uilar explained. "Microfilaments of their alloys, dispersed for hundreds of kilometers like a cloud of powderâ€|they are interfering with our weapon guidance systems."

"_Damnation!_" Niro allowed his anger to take control for a moment. The Shipmaster took in a deep breath and regained his composure. "Can you compensate for the interference?"

"It is too late," Uilar shook his head. "The torpedoes will not regain enough cohesion in time to cause major damage."

Niro had already made up his mind by then. He calmly returned to the shipmaster's chair and sat down, turning to address 'Teharolee at the comm station. "Comm, order the others to tighten the formation and protect our flanks; we are going to need their shields. Helm, maneuver two-one-eight and return to prime heading."

"Shipmaster, that puts us on a collision course with our target," 'Nelasee informed Niro. He was not saying that as a warning, though; more like a semi-interested observation, for the very next thing he said was, "Making course correction," without even waiting to hear Niro's reply.

Niro fixed his gaze on the large Human ship towards which they were hurtling and gave one last order to his second-master. "Weaponsâ€|fire the forward energy projector, dead-center targeting solution."

Uilar did not bother to point out the fact that firing the energy projector would leave the _Sacrosanct_ virtually powerless. The Shipmaster had clearly anticipated this, which was why he had requested the other four vessels to tighten the formation. He was risking muchâ€|but if he had been unwilling to take such risks, he never would have ascended to the rank of Shipmaster in the first place.

"Energy projector spinning upâ€|" Uilar murmured, uttering a brief prayer for fortune under his breath. "_Firing_â€|"

The floor vibrated slightly and there was a faint humming noise that slowly grew in volume and intensity. When the energy projector fired, the discharge could be heard even in the bridge, which was the most heavily armored part of the ship, nestled right in its heart.

A thin beam of blindingly bright, bluish-white energy seared through space and struck the opposing Human ship, gutting it stem to stern. The projector beam had blasted right through the center of the Human ship, causing the subsequent explosion to propel the debris outward. By the time the _Sacrosanct_ glided through the space the Human ship had previously occupied, its remnants had drifted far enough away to prevent a collision.

The bridge of the _Sacrosanct_ was plunged into darkness once more—lights, holotank, viewscreen; _everything_. It required a lot of energy to fire the energy projectors. The _Sacrosanct_, being a Reverence-class cruiser, possessed two cleansing beams—a forward-mounted one that could be easily utilized in naval combat, and a second one mounted underneath the bow of the ship, near the prime gravity lift, which was utilized mainly for the cleansing of Human worlds. Only one energy projector could be fired at a time, normally, but the _Sacrosanct_ was already underpowered. The energy that had already been spent firing two volleys of plasma torpedoes and boosting the forward shields had left Niro's ship with barely enough power to fire an energy projector at all—so after the cleansing beam had been discharged, the ship was left with nothing but minimal life support systems, limited communications, and external sensors.

There was no more plasma for the launchers, not enough power for the pulse lasers, and firing the energy projector again was out of the question. Quite simply, the _Sacrosanct_ needed a brief respite in order to recharge. Normally this would be a death sentence for a vessel in the middle of space combat—but, as it were, the _Sacrosanct_ had four fully-operational vessels protecting it.

It was utter hell for the Shipmaster to wait for the _Sacrosanct_ to regain its breath. The engines had completely shut down, so the cruiser was left simply drifting through space. If left unchecked, the _Sacrosanct_ would eventually be pulled into the Human world's gravity well, but luckily the engines did not take _that_ long to reboot.

"Lightest of All is reporting that the engine temperatures have returned to safe levels," Yeromee broke the silence after half a minute of drifting. "Power has been restored to the main reactor. Bringing up the lights—"

The bridge's lights—the primary lights, not the red backup lights—flickered back on, illuminating the chamber once more.

"Shipmaster, I am receiving transmissions from the Fleetmaster—"
'Teharolee murmured, reflexively touching a finger to his ear. "The Human navy's formation has collapsed—its remnants are retreating to the far side of the planet."

"I want a visual," Niro's impatience surged briefly before the Shipmaster regained control. "_Now_."

The viewscreen flickered back to life just in time for Niro and the rest of the bridge crew to see the handful of surviving Human ships entering a high orbit over the planet, retreating to the far side of the planet as 'Teharolee had indicated.

"Incoming transmission from the _Sacred Flame,_" 'Teharolee informed Niro. "For you alone, Shipmaster."

"Patch it through to the holotank," Niro rose from his chair—he was really starting to get tired of constantly standing up and sitting down, by now—and brushed past the tactical station, approaching the round holo-table that served as the base of the holotank.

Within seconds, the table's surface pulsed with light and a small, holographic image of Fleetmaster 'Ahrmonree resolved into solidity.

"Fleetmaster," Niro clasped his fist to his hearts and bowed his head in a salute.

"_Shipmaster 'Ovarumee,_" the Fleetmaster returned the salute. "_That was quite a gamble with Fate you took, there._"

"Perhaps," the Shipmaster gave a slight shrug. "I had four vessels protecting my vulnerable spots."

"_Still—allowing your ship to go dark in the middle of combat is a gamble with Fate, regardless of the circumstances. We shall have words about this later, however,_" 'Ahrmonree dismissed the matter with a wave of his hand, turning the topic of conversation to more pressing concerns. "_I have just received word from the surface that the Q'Rumno and Issio Creches have cleared the way for us to send in our main forces. You are to ground your ship and unleash our answer to the Humans' defilement. Make any necessary repairs to your vessel during this time._"

"And the Humans?"

"_They are taking shelter on the far side of the planet, but we shall rout them in due time. Our main priority, however, is the excavation of the artifacts._"

"Fleetmaster," Niro bowed his head in a salute once more. "May honor light your path."

"_And yours as well,_" 'Ahrmonree killed the channel with that, his holographic image dissolving into pixels of light.

"Certainly loves his fancy speech, that one," 'Teharolee remarked. Uilar flashed the communications officer a quick glare at the comment, but 'Teharolee simply shrugged and returned to his work.

Niro deactivated the holotank and returned—for the final time, hopefully—to his chair. He ordered 'Nelasee to take the _Sacrosanct_ into the Human world's atmosphere and bring it in for a landing, giving the helmsman the appropriate coordinates.

As the cruiser entered the planet's gravity well and started to descend through its skies, the Shipmaster did his best to ignore what he saw. He did his best to ignore the oceans and continents, the forests and lakes, the deserts and plains, the hills and rivers of this Human world. He found each world he visited to be vastly, surprisingly beautiful in their own very unique ways. Perhaps none of them were as magnificent in his eyes as beloved Sanghelios, but he

still saw their inherent beauty nonetheless.

He did not want to see this world as beautiful, however. It pained him to look upon something like this world and, as he observed its marvels, know that he would also be the cause of its destruction. And so, he did his best to ignore it.

"Send the infantry to the deployment chamber," the Shipmaster ordered, "It is now their turn to seek honor in combat."

9. I Chapter 9: Among the Living

Chapter Nine: Among the Living

9**th**** Age of Reclamation, 13****th**** Cycle
>Human World - "Eden", Unknown System

**Aten**

How did I get myself into this mess?

"Down, you witless fool!" a strong grip seized me by the shoulder and shoved me down to the floor just as a deafening explosion blew another large chunk out of the northern wall of the building. Shrapnel and debris had ripped right through the place where I had been standing an instant before.

I pulled myself into a sitting-up position and turned to see who my savior was. I was surprised when I found myself meeting the gaze of Eolis, the astir to whom Field Officer 'Neiasree had given the task of shadowing us new recruitsâ€"or 'dead men', as the more senior members of the crÃ"che were keen on calling us. My surprise stemmed mostly from the fact that when he was in our company, Eolis never hesitated to remind us that we wereâ€"well, _dead men_. He seemed to enjoy it, even.

So you can understand the confusion I was feeling when Eolis saved my life. When the astir saw my confusion he merely grunted as he ventilated his rifle. "Your part in the charge that took this building earned you an extra life. But only one." The astir, having ventilated his plasma repeater, stalked off to another part of the building to assist his comrades in repelling the latest assault against our position.

Y'mir threw me a sidelong glance as I picked myself back up to my feet. "What was that about?" the islander asked.

That was a very good question, and it tied in with how we got into this mess to begin with. After we had landed out in the meadows and fought our way into the forest, we had come up against heavy resistance. This resistance came from the Human soldiers at the river, which ran between us and the town around which the Humans had centered their defenses. There were many other towns and cities with similar defenses in place, but the powers that be seemed to want us to clear out _this_ town in particular, for whatever reason.

In the center of this town was a large, mounted weaponâ€"when I asked him, my creche's Quartermaster told me that the Humans called this weapon a 'mass driver'. It was essentially a scaled-down version of

the mighty cannons the Humans mounted on their ships, capable of shooting down any naval force that attempted to come planetside. While our fleet would certainly be able to overwhelm the mass driver with its firepower, it would not be able to do so without taking heavy losses—losses that the Fleetmaster had obviously considered to be too high.

And so, the task of neutralizing this mass driver and allowing the handful of vessels that carried our fleet's main infantry forces to make landfall fell to the only forces that were already planetside; the Issio and Q'Rumno Warrior Creches—or, in much plainer terms: _us_.

Supported by our phantoms, we had been able to cross the river at one key location. Once we secured a position on the other riverbank, the Humans consolidated their defenses in front of the actual town itself. While the bulk of our forces continued to press the Humans, our Field Masters had decided to put together a strike force comprising of veteran astiros and the 'dead men' from both crÃches. There were fifty of us total—twenty-five of which were myself and the other 'dead men'. Of the nine of us new recruits who had been inducted into the Q'Rumno's Third Element, three of us had passed on already—and they were not likely going to be the last ones to go. Also accompanying us—the majority of the strike force—were other members of the oronos of both crÃches who had only proven their honor in battle once or twice. Leading the attack was a Field Officer from the Issio Creche, who was supported by a small group of veteran astiros from the Q'Rumno.

We had taken the Humans by surprise during the night and punched right through to the center of town. The mass driver had been set up in their local government building, and we had spilled a good deal of blood to capture the building and destroy it—we had started with a force of fifty, and we now defended our position with not much more than thirty. Nearly half of the dead men on the strike force had proven their collective moniker true during the push through the town, becoming true dead men. Several more of the oronos had met their ends here, as well.

And that was where we found ourselves right now. The mass driver was a smoking ruin on the roof of this building—but we now found ourselves surrounded by the Human forces that we had slipped behind.

During the final push that had resulted in the capture of this building, I had been hunkered behind cover, waiting for my rifle to ventilate. That was when a Human grenade, thrown by an enemy that I never saw, landed at my feet. I dove away just as it detonated, and when the dust settled and I stumbled forward, I found myself alongside the Field Officer from the Issio and four of the astiros—including Eolis—as they charged forward.

We reached one of the entrances to the government building, blew it open with plasma charges, and stormed the first floor. The rest happened really fast—the remainder of the strike force poured in behind us and we took the upper floors one by one until we reached the roof—killed the Humans guarding the mass driver, destroyed the mounted weapon, retreated back inside when Human artillery began pounding us—

And so, in reply to Y'mir's question, I merely said, "He mistook happenstance for valor."

The islander arched a brow at that. "Thank you for not being the slightest bit vague," he sighed.

I tightened my grip on my rifle and joined Y'mir at the nearest window, where he was firing down at a Human position that I couldn't quiteâ€|ah, yes, now I saw them. Cowering behind a pile of burnt-out vehicles, trading fire with us. I took aim and started to open fire, but right then something slammed into my shoulder, sending me flying away from the window and onto my back. I could tell that that had been a sniper shotâ€|in my carelessness after the initial landing, I had been hit by Human weaponsfire twice, and neither of those hits had possessed even half the amount of force behind this last hit.

That was what I had been doing ever since I came to the second floor; trading fire with the Humans through the windows and trying to avoid getting shot in the process.

Y'mir ceased fire and hurried over to me, extending a hand. I took it and he helped me back up to my feet. The two of us turned back to our window and were able to take one step before the entire section of wall surrounding the window disintegrated in a fiery explosion. The force of the explosion sent me right back to my cozy spot on the floor, and Y'mir along with me. My getting hit probably saved Y'mir's life; he would surely have met his end if he had been standing next to the window during that explosion.

As I hit the floor once again, I cannot accurately convey what happened to me. Something snapped within me at that moment and a surge of pure, heart-pounding rage just ripped through my body. I gave a raw-throated howl of frustration, stretching my mandibles as far as they could go, and I sprang back up to my feet.

I was extremely frustrated, furious with these Humans, these sacrilegious abominations, these vermin in the eyes of the Prophetsâ€|these cowards who try to kill me with sniper shots from a distance, with devastating explosives, willing to let their heavy weapons do their dirty workâ€| Uros 'Oenairemee would not have approved of the thoughts raging through my mind, but in that moment I cared for nothing but bringing the fight to the cowards who dared to surround us, who dared to try and send us to our deaths in such a dishonorable manner. I was utterly _through_ with playing defense.

Y'mir's forehead furrowed in a light frown as he watched me lose it. "Aten, perhaps you should calm-

"Follow me, Y'mir," I muttered, grabbing my rifle and storming across the room and out into the main lobby. We were on the second floor of this building, and we headed down the main stairwell into the ground floor. Most of the walls had been knocked down by the intense barrages of plasmafire and now Human weaponsfire that had been constantly tearing at them, so it was a simple matter to walk from one end of the building to another.

There was a pair of Human heavy machinegun emplacements in place that were keeping our forces at the front entrance pinned down, preventing

us from attempting a breakout. They kept us bottled up in this building, stopping us from engaging them out in the open, out where our prowess as Covenant warriors shined the brightest.

"Do you intend to attack those machineguns by yourself?" Y'mir surmised when he saw that I was heading for a side window. "You've had smarter ideas."

I was barely listening. "You are not bound by divine mandate to accompany me," I said to him, brushing past a trio of oronos who were racing up to bolster the defenses near the front entrance, walking towards a gaping hole in the eastern wall, created by a direct hit from an artillery shell. Several of our brothers were laying down fire on the Humans through that gap even as I moved towards it. I recognized two of them—Oros, the yellow-eyed Urassan, and Parala, one of the senior astiros who had accompanied Field Master 'Inanraree when I had been recruited into the Q'Rumno.

People were shouting—giving orders, reports—all around me, but their voices were just one huge blur in my ears, and their movements were likewise blurred to my eyes. I moved as if my body was on some sort of auto-pilot. Before I knew it, I was leaping through the hole in the wall and out into the street. All I could hear was my own heartbeat, the sound of blood rushing through my ears.

"Highlander, wait!" I heard Oros shout. The yellow-eyed Urassan's grip descended onto my shoulder, but I shook him off and kept moving forward. "Have you completely lost your wits?"

"Perhaps a little insanity is what it will take to break the Humans' hold over us," I retorted. "I grow weary of being called a dead man while I yet draw breath—| Join me or remain here; it makes no difference to me."

I really find it hard to explain what I was feeling, now. The white-hot, all-consuming rage that had filled me back on the second-floor had subsided, and replacing it was—I do not know. Resignation, perhaps? Yes, that seemed accurate—I almost had a vision of my future in the cr—che—constantly trying to survive, constantly trying to give the veterans a reason to stop calling me a 'dead man', constantly trying to defy impossible odds—I could not see myself leaving the oronos.

Right now, I was having a sort of realization. I would not call it an epiphany—it was not nearly as clear and earth-shattering to be an epiphany—but it was still a sort of realization—a sort of acceptance. The thing about the future, what keeps people invested in living out their lives, is that they do not know what lies down the road. Similarly, I did not know if I would even live to see my nineteenth day of birth. If I was fated to die on this planet, then there was nothing I could do that would change this outcome. Even if I did not intend to attack those heavy machineguns, I would still meet my end in some other fashion.

So what, exactly, did I have to lose in doing so, other than my life? Nothing. It was my way of forcing Fate to an ultimatum—most warriors perform an elaborate dance with Death, always acknowledging its presence and the possibility that it might take them away, but always trying to keep it at arm's-length. What I was doing right now, however, was more like planting myself on both feet, staring Death

square in the eye, and holding out my hand, daring it to accept. If it was my time, and it took me, I would go with it gladly. If notâ€|

If not, then I would know that I was not doomed to die as a 'dead man'. As I said before, I do not believe this is something that can be easily explained to someone not of my own mindset. In the plainest terms, I had already committed myself to neutralizing those heavy machineguns and resigned myself to whatever the consequences ended up being.

The government building upon which the mass driver had been mounted stood at the western side of the small square in the center of town. The square was filled with abandoned vehicles, which the Humans were using as cover from our own weapons. The two heavy machineguns were situated in the middle of the square, behind the remains of what had once been a fountain. If the Humans had armored support, they would have been able to roll right through us without a second thoughtâ€| Had they not been forced to keep the rest of our creches' forces at bay in the outskirts of town, I have no doubt that they would have been able to crush us even _without_ the assistance of their tanks. But that all depended on the existence of certain circumstancesâ€|circumstances which, as fate would have it, were _not_ present in reality.

I faltered briefly as I felt a spray of Human weaponsfire rake across my leg and abdomen. My recharged shields glimmered as they absorbed the latest attempt on my life.

I was not sprinting straight at the machineguns through their fireâ€"even in my current state, I was not stupid enough to attempt such a thing. That was why I exited through the southern side of the building; I was rushing the softer, more impromptu defenses occupied only by infantry. It would then be much easier to hook around and attack the machineguns from their flank. The key was speed; if I tarried too long while I tried to flank the machineguns, the majority of the Humans would take notice and tear me apart.

But, as it turned out, I was not alone. Y'mir, despite his reservations, had remained close behind me. There were three oronosâ€"one of them was Marel, a younger orono who was part of the Third Element of the Q'Rumno, as well; but I was unfamiliar with the other twoâ€"who had also followed me out into the streets. Oros, too, seemed to have reluctantly joined my impromptu attackâ€"the native of the Urassa Desert brought up the rear, taking carefully-aimed shots with his energy rifle as he muttered under his breath, no doubt asking himself why he had not remained in the tentative 'safety' of the building.

I was not the leader of this group, or anything. There _was_ no real leaderâ€| I was merely the first one out.

An orb of blazing blue arced overhead and landed behind one of the automobiles. Whoever threw that plasma grenade had rather decent aim, I had to admit. I would have had to get a bit closer to the Humans' positions in order to score hits as accurate as that with grenades.

The grenade went off, sending the car it had landed behind flying. I don't know if it hit any of the Humans who had been hiding behind

that carâ€|but if the grenade had not gotten them, _we_ did. The first one who fell to me was leaning against one of the adjacent cars, a dazed expression on its face. I leveled my rifle and squeezed the trigger grip, sinking a short burst of plasma charges into the Human's chest as it scrambled to retrieve its weapon.

The Human jerked as the plasma seared through its body, going limp and crumpling to the ground. I did not stop to watch its death; the rest of the Humans who had been hunkered behind these cars had recovered from the shock of the explosion by now.

Another Human raised its own rifle and opened fire at me. I was driven back several paces by the force of the gunfire striking me in the torso. My shield was already partially depleted from the burst of gunfire I'd taken during the sprint from the government building, and it really was not going to hold up very much longer under this new onslaught.

But then the Human was suddenly felled by a burst of plasmafire that came from somewhere behind me. Y'mir planted himself in front of me, taking the brunt of the Human weaponsfire on his fully-charged shields. The nodes at the tip of his rifle were already glowingâ€"he had been the one to kill that last Human. By then, Oros and the three others had caught up with us, adding their firepower to our own. Between the six of us, we tore through the impromptu 'defenses' in a matter of seconds. We did not kill all of the Humansâ€"a good number of them were able to retreatâ€"but we certainly did not give them an easy time of it.

We did not stop moving once we bulled through; we kept right on going. Instead of pressing on towards the Human positions further south, along the perimeter of the square, we startedâ€|heading around towards the fountain at the center of the square. I hesitate only because saying that we were 'heading around towards the fountain' makes it all sound so much simpler than what we were actually doing. There was now a greater amount of Human weaponsfire tearing our way than there had been half a minute ago, needless to say; the Humans were beginning to take notice of us. We had to neutralize those machineguns before we were overwhelmed by their firepower.

To accomplish this end, we did our best to refrain from engaging the Humans between us and our objective. We simply ran as fast as we could, killing any who were unfortunate enough to be directly in our path. We blew right past a good number of Humans, too, and they continued to fire at us from behindâ€|but we did not make ourselves easy targets. We were sprinting, rememberâ€"weaving in and out between wrecked automobiles, leaping over debris, and generally making ourselves much harder to hit.

That did not mean we evaded their weaponsfire, however; not by a longshot. Y'mir and I were ahead of the others, and we often swapped places with one another. This was so that when my shields were weakened, they could recharge while Y'mir's took the brunt of the weaponsfire, and vice versa. This system worked for a brief time until, at one point when I was the one in the lead, the nearer of the two heavy machineguns was swung in our direction.

I faltered as I was suddenly bombarded by the bone-shattering impacts of the heavy machinegun's ammunition being fired into the general vicinity of my vitals. My already-weakened shields could not stand up

to the onslaught of these heavier projectiles, and they failed within seconds.

"_Down!_" I bellowed, diving for cover behind the nearest automobile wreck. I almost made it unscathedâ€¦ Of course, in the middle of combat, 'almost' rarely resulted in good consequences. One of the heavy projectiles struck me in the hand just as my shields failed, just as I was diving for cover.

I felt something warm and wet dripping down the back and palm of my left hand, as well as a dull ache in the upper thumb. "Close call," I remarked to my compatriot.

"That is one way of describing it," the islander nodded, speaking between deep breaths.

I leaned against the wreck alongside Y'mir and wiped my hand off on my legâ€¦ only to give a grunt of surprise when the dull ache suddenly ballooned into a white-hot agony.

I glanced down at my hand...and froze. "Thumbâ€¦ Thumb, goneâ€¦" was all I managed to say in that moment.

My left upper thumb was, as I said, gone. All that remained was a ragged stump where the Human bullet had torn it off, still bleeding profuselyâ€¦ That was the wetness I had felt. My own blood.

"_Damnation_â€¦" Y'mir swore when he saw my wound. He cast me a questioning glance. "Can you hold your weapon?"

I grimaced as I picked my rifle back up, but found that I was still able to maintain a firm enough grip with my left hand. Had I lost the _lower_ thumb, I would have been unable to wield anything larger than a pistolâ€¦ but I still retained my lower thumbâ€¦ and with it, my ability to hold my rifle. And yet, my grip, while existent, was still weakenedâ€¦ I had yet to see what consequences the wound would entail.

But there was no time to ponder. There were two heavy machineguns that needed to be taken care of.

Luckily, Marelâ€¦ the orono from the same element of the Q'Rumno as Y'mir, Oros, and myselfâ€¦ was able to come within throwing range of the nearer machinegun. He was the one who had thrown that grenade, earlier. And he showed off his accuracy once again, hurling a second plasma grenade towards the Humans' strongpoint. It did not actually hit the machinegun, but it went off near enough to it to disorient its crew momentarily.

That brief respite was all we needed. By then, my shieldsâ€¦ and Y'mir's as wellâ€¦ were back up to one-hundred-percent. I met his gaze once more, knowing what we had to do. "Split?" I asked him.

"Split," he nodded back to me.

In unison, the two of us broke cover and sprinted in opposite directions, curving around and rushing the machinegun emplacement from two different sides. The Humans could only fire the machinegun at one of us, and they seemed to focus their aim on Y'mir. I squeezed

off another burst of plasma from my rifle, catching a shotgun-wielding Human in the neck and shoulder. It went down without a sound.

Y'mir's aim was better than mine, but I was faster on my feet. I don't think I'll ever sprint at a faster speed than when I had been chased by that snow manx in the Lhetae Mountains—but the speed at which I was running right now surely had to come close. That, too, was thanks to my Guardian's training, I suppose. During my childhood, he always used to take me on a run every morning before the suns came up—every day, it would be to a new destination; a new cliff to watch the sunrise from, a new hilltop to witness the myriad rainbow hazes of the first rays of dawn refracting through the thick morning mists that always collected in between the Crimson Hills—I'd struggled with swordplay and many of the other physical tasks Uros 'Oenairemee set me to, but one thing I had always been consistently good at was running.

And I demonstrated this today. The Human machinegun crew, focusing at first on Y'mir, did not see me coming until it was too late. They tried to swivel the machinegun around to face me, but I was already leaping over one of the automobile wrecks piled up in front of the fountain. I slid across its hood, landing on the other side. I yanked a grenade from my waist, primed it, and hurled it so that it stuck onto the rim of the fountain. It detonated, sending fragments of stone into a deadly hail of shrapnel, battering the Humans manning the machinegun. The heavy weapon was thrown off its stands, clattering to the ground. The Humans were all blown off their feet—one of them never got back up.

As they regained their footing, I vaulted over the remains of the fountain's rim and opened fire, pumping a burst of plasma into one of the gunners. Unfortunately, my rifle's charge was depleted after this, rendering the weapon useless until I reloaded. And reloading, right now, would take too much time.

The remaining two members of the machinegun crew opened fire on me, peppering my shields with their metallic projectiles. I threw myself into a sideways roll, springing back up to my feet. I dropped my rifle and struck the first Human in the lower ribs, hearing and feeling the bones snap from the blow. The Human went down screaming and—no doubt—swearing. I immediately pivoted on my right foot, swinging myself around towards the second Human.

Just as my shields were nearing zero charge once again, I slammed into the second Human. Judging from the higher pitch of its voice, it appeared to be female. It made little difference to me—Human males and females both died the same way; _easily_. I wrapped my left arm around the Human female's back and yanked her close. As I did this, I balled my right hand into a fist, activating the energy dagger mounted on my wrist, and struck the female under the chin. The miniature energy blade sank into the fleshy area under the Human's chin, penetrating through its mouth and into its brain, killing it instantly.

I pulled my wrist dagger free and let the Human female's corpse fall.

The first Human, who I had struck in the ribs, was picking itself back up by this point. It fumbled for its sidearm, but just as I

moved to finish it off with my wrist dagger, Oros suddenly stepped in front of me, planted a foot on the Human's chest, and shot it once in the face, finishing what I had started.

By now, Marel and his two compatriots had reached our position, but they did not stop. Instead, they just charged the second machinegun emplacement, located on the other side of the fountain. They wiped out its gunners in short order and destroyed the heavy weapon.

With the two machineguns neutralized and a good amount of the Human presence in the square turning its attention to us, our brothers in the government building were finally able to stage a breakout without suffering massive casualties. The Field Officer from the Issio Creche was the first one out the front entrance, followed closely by the remaining survivors of the strike force.

Without the heavy machineguns to keep us suppressed, the Humans' defenses suddenly became a good deal softer. We advanced in small groups, covering each other as we went. In a way, it was simply what the six of us had done to rush the machinegun emplacements, only on a larger scale—one group would advance while covered by another group further on back, stopping to recharge their shields. They would then cover the second group until it reached cover further on up. Then the whole process would repeat.

We did not keep up the advance, however. Disorganized and now outgunned due to the loss of the two heavy machineguns that had kept us bottled up inside, the Humans were quickly driven from the square. Once we secured the square, however, we stopped. Presumably, this was to keep anyone from the main host from thinking that we were retreating. We wouldn't be retreating, obviously—but from their point of view, we would be moving in the opposite direction we had set out in, which would look an awful lot like a retreat. Better to secure our current position and wait for relief.

The Humans actually did not assail us very much further. Not long after we drove them from the square, I think they actually withdrew from the rest of the town. Perhaps their navy was still able to extract them, perhaps not—either way, it was not long before the sounds of battle died down.

Field Officer 'Neiasree, the officer of the Q'Rumno's Third Element—of which I was a part—was the first to enter the square, at the head of a large column reinforced by armor. Gun carriages hummed down the streets, nudging automobile wrecks out of the way. Walking among the tanks were the warriors of both crÃches. The battle for this town was over.

I stood still, perfectly still—closing my eyes and taking several deep breaths, I calmed my thoughts by listening to the soft breeze that was breathing gently through the town. Even when things are at their most chaotic, you can always find calm in Nature. More words of wisdom from Uros—my Guardian never seemed to run out of them.

I heard footsteps approaching from behind, falling silent when they were right behind me. A deep, husky voice said, "Stand fast."

I opened my eyes and turned round, coming face to face with none other than Qel 'Inanraree. "Field Master," I clasped my fist to my left heart and bowed in a salute.

"I was enlightened by Field Officer 'Ngaviree of the Issio to what transpired here before our arrival," 'Inanraree informed me. "I would have you know that there is a fine line between valor and foolishness."

"My Guardian said they are often the same thing," I interjected.

The Field Master hesitated, arching a brow. "A wise man, this Guardian of yours. You would do well to heed whatever wisdom he imparted to you. Contrary to popular belief, the Covenant Army is not filled with heroes who take on the entire Human race on a daily basis. It is filled with warriors. Warriors who follow orders and fulfill their duty. Warriors who remain true to their honor. It is the men who fancy themselves as heroes who join the ranks of our venerated dead, as a consequence of their foolishness. Which are you, I wonder? Hero or warrior?"

I found myself at a loss for words. I don't know what kind of reaction I had been expectingâ€|but this certainly had not been it.

Then the Field Master seemed to relent a tad bit. "Do not mistake my meaning; you accomplished a great feat, here. By taking down those heavy weapons, you may have saved the lives of several of your brothersâ€|this is not an accomplishment to think little of. Not many oronos can tempt Death like you did and live to tell the tale. However, I would caution you against tempting Death twiceâ€|it just might oblige you, next time." The Field Master's gaze then flitted down to my hand, noticing my wound. He gave a slight frown and called out Eolis's name.

Within seconds, the veteran astir appeared, jogging over from another part of the square. "_Field Master,_" he saluted 'Inanraree.

"You were assigned to shadow the new recruits of the Third Element, correct?" 'Inanraree asked the astir.

"Field Officer 'Neiasree entrusted me with that task, yes," Eolis confirmed.

The Field Master nodded over to me. "One of your charges has been wounded. Have him tended to."

"Your will, Field Master," Eolis saluted his commander one last time. 'Inanraree took his leave, heading off to tend to other matters. Eolis took a look at my hand, at my missing upper thumb, and gave a low grunt. "That will need tending to," he remarked, turning away and walking towards the road we had entered the square on. "Follow me."

"You are not taking me to a doctor, are you?" I asked hesitantly.

Eolis threw me a sidelong glance. "I would not subject you to such a dishonor, not for a little scratch like that."

"Little scratch, yes," I muttered, staring at the stump on my left hand. The shock of losing the thumb was beginning to wear offâ€|and in the absence of the shock, pain reigned supreme. The dull ache was

gradually intensifying. Soon, I knew I would probably be staggering from the agony. Now that I knew that I was not being taken to a doctorâ€"thank the Godsâ€"I could not help but wonder how I was going to beâ€"ahemâ€"tended to'.

The answer was both simple and unpleasant. Eolis took me to see the Quartermasterâ€"the middle-aged technical specialist assigned to the Q'Rumno. He was dark gray-skinned, but I could not see the color of his eyes because of the dark goggles that he wore. He had set up shop in the garage of one of the houses on the fringe of town. The older man was currently tinkering with a plasma cannon that seemed to have malfunctioned in the field, but he abandoned his work when he saw us approaching.

"A good fight, lads," the Quartermaster said to us as we ducked into the garage. I took a moment to take in the older man's vast array of weapons and tools. It was somewhat unusual, seeing technically-inclined member of our species. I knew that there were plenty of people like himâ€"we just did not seem them very often.

"Aten here has a wound that needs tending," Eolis nudged me forward.

I noticed that now was the very first time the astir had referred to me by name, and not by some demeaning insult that was tied to the likelihood of my imminent death. But I did not have any time to dwell on this fact because the Quartermaster reached forward and gripped my wrist, pulling me forward to examine the wound.

"_Mm,_ " the older man hummed, pushing his goggles up to his forehead, scrutinizing the wound that had once been my upper thumb with his sharp eyesâ€"which, because he moved his goggles, I could see were yellow. "Quite a scratch you have here, boy."

"A scratch, yesâ€" I found myself saying for the second time, ignoring the urge to scream in the older man's face that it was just a little bit _more_ than a scratch. To me, at least.

"Scratch it may be, but even scratches can kill. Wound like that has a good chance of infection," the Quartermaster released my hand and stood up, pulling what I recognized as the hilt an energy blade from his waist. He activated the sword, its twin-pointed, blue-white blade hissing into existence. "No chance of reattachment with the way the bullet took your thumb off, even if you had the digit on hand..._heh_â€" the Quartermaster snorted at his accidental pun, "so I'm afraid we'll have to cauterize."

My gaze flitted from my thumb's stump to the Quartermaster's energy sword, and then back to my stump. "Surely you jest."

The Quartermaster shook his head. "Not this time, no. Eolis, if you would assist?"

Eolis seized my arm and pushed it down onto the table. "For your own good," the astir explained. "You'll jumpâ€"everyone doesâ€"and if you are not restrained, you will bring yourself to grave harm."

I did not fight Eolis. From the way it looked, I did not appear to have a choice. And in any case, I would rather get the wound treated

swiftly and have it be over and done with, rather than have to live with it for a longer amount of time as a result of getting it treated in a less painful way. And so, I took a deep breathâ€”well, _several_ deep breathsâ€”and gave the Quartermaster a single nod. "_Do it_."

The older man turned his sword and pressed the flat of the plasma blade down onto the stump of my thumb. Eolis was right; I jerked violently in reaction to the sudden, searing agony that accompanied the 'treatment'. My arm and hand, however, were kept immobile by Eolis's grip. The pain shot right from my hand, up my arm, and straight into my brain, paralyzing me with its heat and intensity. Was this the kind of pain that Humans felt whenever they were skewered with these weapons?

Luckily, the blade was pressed to my hand only for an instant. My hand still throbbed with red-hot pain, but at least the plasma was no longer in direct contact. Where the wound had been, only a red, raw, puckered scar now existed.

"Try and go easy on it," the Quartermaster advised me, deactivating his blade.

And that was it. No dressing, no bandages, no painkillersâ€”just some generic advice that anyone with common sense would not have needed. I am certain that this was not the best way to treat a wound like this...but I did not raise a fuss.

As we made our way back to the square, I passed by many members of the Q'Rumno, and I made no effort to hide my now-deformed hand. My brothers, when they saw me, no longer brushed past and acted as if I was a ghost. They no longer acted like I was upsetting the natural order of things just by staying alive. "_Aten,_" they would say, giving me respectful nods as I passed them by. Just as Eolis had done earlier, my brothers were calling me by my name.

I allowed myself a faint grin, doing my best to ignore the fiery inferno that was blazing in my left hand.

I am a dead man no more.

* * *

><p>Author's Note</p>

Okay, just wanted to quasi-apologize for the long delay in getting this chapter finished. I've been super busy with the Theatre Department's fall semester musical, so I really am not on my computer very much. If you've ever been involved with a musical, you know what I mean when I say that it consumes you until it is finished. I've been steadily working away on this chapter for the past couple weeks, and I've only just finished it today. I hope it doesn't take this long to update in the future; once the show's run is finished, I'll have a tad bit more time on my hands...but I can't make any promises. I'm on the computer a lot less in college than I was in High School.

TheAmateur

10. I Chapter 10: Man in the Shadows

Chapter Ten: Man in the Shadows

****9****th****** Age of Reclamation, 13****th****** Cycle
>High Charity

Uros****

"The Ceulaimon District is just shy of the eastern radius, on the other side of the Inner Circle," Ouran 'Inzaunumee was explaining to his fellow Councilor. "A fifteen minute trip on a shuttle from Yhire. Transportation to any part of the Holy City can be easily arranged from the Inner Circle. What calls you to the Middle Districts?"

"A San 'Shyuum musical performance. Old acquaintances of mine back on the Homeworld have recommended Ceulaimon Theatre," Uros explained to the blue-eyed Councilor. "When one's day is unburdened by matters of state, it must be taken advantage of. Unless you disagree?"

"I most certainly do not disagree," Ouran retorted, relaxing his grip on his datapad, letting it tap down onto the surface of the table. "Call it curiosity, if you will. You did not strike me as the theatre type."

"I will be spending a considerable amount of time here," Uros shrugged. "Might as well attempt to discover new interests."

"May fortune smile upon your ventures, then," Ouran did not attempt to conceal his smirk, returning his attention to the datapad.

Uros did not wear his armor, as he was not attending a conclave or performing some other duty in his official capacity. And, off the record, he absolutely hated having to wear that damned headdress that came with the helmet, so he wore his ceremonial garb only when necessary. Instead, he wore a loose white cloth shirt and pants, as well as a black leather jerkin. Not the most fashionable outfit ever to grace the streets of the Holy City, perhaps—but being a Councilor more than made up for that.

Uros checked his timepiece as he made his way through the Blessed Silver Woods into the Yhire Commune. It was nearly a unit past Midmorning, which translated to around ten o'clock in Formal Time. Two units before Noon. He was due at the Ied Unnel Theatre at Noon—and he believed the actual performance started not long before that. He did not have an infinite amount of time to waste.

Uros had not told Ouran the entire truth about his venture to Ceulaimon. He spoke the truth about going to the theatre, but he had lied when he said that it had been friends from Sanghelios who had suggested he visit the Middle Districts. The reason he was going to Ceulaimon was because someone had slipped a message into his travel bag when he had first arrived in the Holy City. The message had told the Councilor to be at the Ied Unnel Theatre at Noon. It had also told him to come alone.

Though Uros did not quite know why, he had not told his friend about the strange note. Some measure of instinct, deep down in his mind, told him that perhaps it was best to keep the note a secret. After all, if someone went through the trouble to plant a message in the

Councilor's bag, it obviously concerned something that the perpetrator did not wish the entire population of High Charity to know. Better not to advertise it, not even to Ouran.

Uros passed through the Yhire Commune and headed into the local transportation hub. Each commune had one, allowing more streamlined transportation around the Inner Circle and out to the Middle Districts. Finding a transport bound for Ceulaimon was not difficult at all, especially from the Inner Circle. Uros was bound for the eastern radius within half a unit of leaving his home.

The trip did not take very long, despite Ceulaimon being on the opposite side of the Dreadnought as the Yhire Commune. Had Uros been traveling from the Middle Districts near the western radius, it would have taken much longer. But traveling from the Inner Circle was usually a more streamlined process.

It was less than a unit before Noon by the time the Councilor arrived in Ceulaimon District. Knowing that he had no time to waste, Uros quickly made his way out of the transportation hub. The Middle Districts were much more dense and populated than the communes of the Inner Circle. This was only natural, considering the fact that the majority of the Holy City's San 'Shyuum population resided in those areas. The result was a much more urbanized setting—though the Prophets still managed to find ways to soften the more city-like aspects of the districts with nature. There were no forests like there were in the Inner Circle, but there were still plenty of green areas.

The inhabitants of Ceulaimon spoke with an odd, somewhat twangy accent. The colors were much brighter in this district, and the cuisine smelled spicier. Music filled the air on many of the street corners, as well, adding to the cultural haze that almost bombarded the Councilor from the moment he left the transportation hub. Uros did not have time to observe the environment, however. He needed to get to the theatre before the performance started. The Councilor stopped at one of the streetside kiosks and asked for directions.

"First time experiencing the arts of the Holy City, hm?" the San 'Shyuum vendor surmised. "There aren't many who do not know where the theatres lie."

"I only recently came to the Holy City, summoned to serve on the High Council," Uros confirmed for the vendor. "I fear that many of the wonders of High Charity are as of yet unknown to me."

The vendor regarded Uros with new eyes. "A Councilor, you are? Out and about in the Middle Districts, clad in the garments of a common citizen? Today is proving to be an interesting day—"

The vendor pointed down the street and gave Uros a short series of directions that would lead him to Ascension Street, which was where the heart of Ceulaimon Theatre was located. One of those venues had to be the one mentioned in the note, the Ied Unnel Theatre.

Uros walked quickly, turning down the roads that the street vendor had indicated. Ascension was one of the larger streets Uros had seen in the Holy City, as well as one of the brightest. Bright signs lined both sides of the road, which was completely packed with bustling

crowds of San 'Shyuum civilians, as well as a smattering of Sangheili. A few vehicles made their way down the road itself, but not manyâ€”navigating through Ascension by any means other than foot would prove to beâ€”laborious.

The unifying language of the Covenant was AnÃ§icâ€”the most common of the myriad tongues of the Sangheili. All Sangheili, San 'Shyuum, and even the Jiralhanae were familiar with it. The Mgalekgolo were also, for the most part, well versed in AnÃ§ic, most likely due to their respect for the Sangheilian race. While the races of the Covenant conversed with one another in AnÃ§ic, they always reverted to their native tongues among themselves. Because the population of the Middle Districts was so predominately San 'Shyuum, the signs were all in the language of the Prophets, with AnÃ§ic subheadings.

Uros was able to easily find the Ied Unnel Theatre because of these subheadings. The subheading of the theatre was not necessarily a translation, as the name had no meaning in the AnÃ§ic language. It was merely a transliteration from San 'Shyuum glyphs to Sangheilian runes. The Councilor stepped off the street and made his way through one of the Ied Unnel Theatre's entrances. He was directed to the box office, where he purchased an entrance pass for the performance. He was sure he could have gotten a discount if the staff knew he was a Councilor, but he did not enjoy flaunting his title of office.

It was a little over half a unit to Noon by the time Uros made his way to his seat, which was situated on the house left aisle in the second-last row, right near one of the exits. Glancing at the show's program, Uros saw that it did not actually start until half a unit _past_ Noon. There were other people in their seats, as well, but it was clear that Uros was at the theatre early.

The Councilor refrained from checking his timepiece every few minutes. He wished he'd known that the performance would not start until much laterâ€”had he known this, he would not have been in such a rush. He probably could have grabbed a quick lunch from one of the vendors, even. Uros was not a man who enjoyed rushing to do anything. Living in the Crimson Hills for the past eighteen cycles, away from the busy population centers, had made him accustomed to the patience and pleasantries of country life.

After getting lost in his own thoughts for a short while, Uros was suddenly dragged back to reality by something cold and metallic being pressed into the back of his neck. The Councilor immediately tensed up, but before he could react, a voice whispered, "_Do not turn around_. _Remain facing forward_."

Uros cast a discreet glance down to the timepiece he wore on his wrist. Sure enough, it read twelve o'clock in Formal Time. _Noon_. Was the owner of the voice the one who had slipped the note into the Councilor's bag?

"You are the source of that little surprise I found in my personal effects?" Uros asked.

"It was not easy, but yes," the mysterious man confirmed. He whispered in a low, husky tone that was clearly not his natural voice, so Uros was unable to determine his accent, and therefore where he hailed from. The Councilor could easily tell, however, that the assailant was Sangheili. "My time is short, so I cannot afford to

waste any with idle conversation. There are things that have happened on the High Council of which you have no knowledge whatsoever, things that resulted in your ascension to your current rankâ€¦things that are still happening as we speak."

"Who are you?" Uros fought the urge to turn around and face his assailant. The cold metal weapon pressed into the back of his neck was proving to be a good deterrent.

"I am no longer anyone of consequence," was all the unseen man said in reply. "Keep silent, Councilor; as I said before, my time is short. When I learned that you were one of the candidates for the newly-opened position on the High Council, Iâ€™ pulled a few strings and made sure that you were the newest addition. In exile I may now live, but I am far from powerless. You are, so far, uncorrupted by the politics of the High Council, but the main reason I am speaking to you now is your personality. Or, more specifically, your curiosity."

"I do not follow."

"You are much more curious than most of our brothers," the mysterious man explained. "And, as a member of the High Council, you will have access to many places from which lesser individuals would be barred. You see, I am conducting a little investigation of sorts. There is a very important itemâ€¦if I explained the nature of this investigation to you, you would not believe a word I said, and I would lose you. Keeping that in mind, I will instead allow you to discover on your own what it is I am seeking."

Uros did not know what to say. Investigations? Items of import? What in the name of the spirits of Aether was this man talking about? The Councilor decided to remain silent, in the hopes that the unseen assailant would continue to explain. His hopes were rewarded.

"Keep vigilant, Councilor. The politics of the High Council can sometimes prove to be nearly as deadly as the war. Tread as quietly as a helioskrill and take care not to attract the attention of the Hierarchs or the Lesser Prophets," the mysterious man cautioned. "I will leave you with advice twofold. Firstlyâ€™ know you the demise of Thanos 'Jar 'Kharreeve?"

"Imperial Admiral 'Wattinree's predecessor?" Uros arched a brow. "Who hasn't heard of the fate of him and his fleet?"

"Your investigations will eventually lead you to the late Imperial Admiral," the unseen man informed the Councilor. "My advice to you is to dig. And once you start diggingâ€™ keep digging. My other piece of advice is for you to return home. Your friend, Ouran 'Inzaunumeeâ€™ he is a good man. Ask him about how you were able to join the High Council. Ask him about the Minister of Tranquility."

"The Minister of Tranquility?" Uros's forehead furrowed in a light frown. He faintly remembered hearing the Minister of Tranquility speak during the Conclave, the other day, speaking about the Human colony world which his former ward, Aten, was currently fighting on. The Councilor could not recall anything particularly special about the Minister.

"Aye, the Minister of Tranquility," the unseen man repeated himself. "I will leave you a data node. After you speak with Councilor 'Inzaunumee, read its contents; it will offerâ€|contradictions. My time is up, now; I will not tempt Fate by remaining in the Middle Districts any longer than I need to."

"Why must you hide yourself so?" Uros quickly asked before his assailant pulled away. "What crime have you committed?"

"The crime was done to _me,_ " the unseen man hissed. "If my existence were to be made known to the High Council, everything I have worked for, everything I am _still_ working forâ€|it will all be for nothing. You must never breathe a word of me to anyone. Not even your closest friends. Good day, Councilorâ€|may Honor light your path."

The weapon was withdrawn from Uros's neck and droppedâ€|the Councilor heard it clatter to the floor. There was a slight swish of robes as the unseen man slipped away. By the time Uros turned around, his assailant had already vanished through the doors. Even if he had given chase, Uros knew that the unseen man would have already made it out into the streets, making him impossible to find. The mysterious man would remain a mystery.

The Councilor twisted around and looked down behind his seat, reaching down and picking up the weapon the unseen man had held to his neck. To Uros's surprise, it was not a weapon at all; it was merely a lead figurine of the First Prophetâ€|a figure of San 'Shyuum mythology. Fastened with some kind of adhesive to the bottom of it was a tiny data node, presumably the one the unseen man had mentioned. Uros's mandibles twitched and drew back slightly in a wry grin. Shaking his head, he slipped the figurine into one of his pockets.

* * *

><p>The trip back to the Inner Circle took a bit longer than the trip into Ceulaimon. Uros was unable to find a transport to the Yhire Commune, so he had to take one to the Western Radius Station, one of the four main hubs of the Inner Circle. From there, he was able to acquire transportation to Yhire.<p>

The Councilor took his time as he walked back home through the Blessed Silver Woods. He stopped once or twice to look at the floating orbs of light when one or two of them drifted across the path, before being snatched back up again by the wind.

Uros entered his home to the smell of poached pyraskrill legs. This surprised him a little; pyraskrill legs were a cuisine enjoyed almost exclusively by islandersâ€|Uros was partial to them only because of his long friendship with Niro 'Ovarumee. The island-state of Ovarum, along with the Taham Archipelago, was one of the largest bastions of islander culture, and their peoples were certainly unafraid to show their love of islander cuisine. Uros wondered how Ouran had come to appreciate those foods.

"How was it?" Ouran called out from the kitchen, hearing his friend's entrance. "The show?"

"Rather enjoyable, I must say," Uros replied. After his encounter

with the man in the shadows, Uros had decided to remain for the actual performance. Purchasing an entrance pass and then promptly leaving might have aroused suspicion. Unlikely, but possible. And while Uros had not pegged himself as a theatre-going man, he figured he might revise that opinion in the near future. "It was in the San 'Shyuum language, so it was hard to followâ€|but it was certainly different from what our own theatres normally do."

"Which is probably the main reason why it is so enjoyable," Ouran quirked, earning a low chuckle from his friend.

Ouran finished dinner a few minutes later and served it up on dining slabs. Uros poured himself a glass of skyfruit juice and sat down opposite his friend, helping himself to the legs. The two Councilors ate in silence for a short time while Uros considered the best way for him to ask Ouran about what the man in the shadows had told him.

'Oenairemee eventually broke the silence by asking, "So tell meâ€|how often does the High Council gain a new member?"

"It is not something that happens every week," Ouran said. "Only the death or resignation of a Councilor or a Lesser Prophet allows for a new member to be appointed."

"So which was it that resulted in my own ascension? Resignation or death?"

Ouran arched a brow. "Does it matter?"

Uros drew his mandibles back in a smile, throwing some of his friend's words back at him. "Call it idle curiosity."

Ouran was silent for a few moments, having another pyraskrill leg and taking a sip of juice before finally answering, "When the Vice Minister of Tranquility took over the post of the previous Minister, it created a chain reaction that resulted in a gap in the ranks of the Sangheili Councilors, allowing for your ascension."

"So then it was a death," Uros declared. "The death of the previous Minister of Tranquility, no lessâ€|"

"A death indeed," Ouran nodded somberly. "He was dispatched to the Second Fleet of Righteous Vigilance, for reasons unknown. The fleet came into conflict with the Human Navy and the ship on which the Minister was stationed was lost. The only anomaly with his death was that it was not officially announcedâ€|the Prophets did not seem to want anyone to know the details. We were informed of the Vice Minister's promotionâ€|and that was that. I had to look into the archives to discover the former Minister's fate."

"Unusual, is it not, for the death of such a high-ranking official to be silenced in such a way?" Uros wondered aloud. This new information certainly sounded interesting...could the man in the shadows, perhaps, have meant the former Minister of Tranquility, rather than the current one?

Ouran gave only a shrug in response. "I am sure the Prophets had their reasons. Ultimately, it is pointless to investigate further into the whole thing; the former Minister is gone and he is not

coming back. Nothing will change that."

Uros unconsciously rubbed the pocket that held the figurine of the First Prophet. "Gratitude for the meal, brother," he thanked Ouran, rising from the table. "I think I will retire to my room, and then perhaps I shall walk these woods after nightfall, if you would care to join me."

"I believe I would," Ouran nodded. "Tell me when you intend to go."

Uros left the kitchen and headed upstairs to his bedchamber. He took off his jerkin, taking out the figurine of the First Prophet. The Councilor plucked the data node from the figurine's base before setting the small lead likeness down on the dresser. Uros inserted the node into his datapad and sat down in the armchair next to his bed, waiting patiently for the pad to detect the node.

The data node's icon appeared in the lower corner. Uros tapped it, expanding it into a window. There were two folders within; one labeled 'FLEET-RECs' and the other labeled 'MoT'. Uros opened FLEET-RECs, which revealed a good-sized number of files. The Councilor took his time perusing through these files. He quickly realized that he was looking at records from the Second Fleet of Righteous Vigilance. Battle reports, logistics entries, status updates, casualty lists, personal logs of the Fleetmaster, the shipmasters, their second-masters, their subordinate officers—all of it dating back four months. It took Uros a while to look through all of the files, but he did not stop until he had skimmed through every one of them. Though he knew what he was reading, he did not know what the significance was. What was he looking for?

There was only one file left. It was a text file, created on the data node. It was not from the archives. Uros opened it. The message was very short and simple, and it told Uros all he needed to know. It read, '_Minister of Tranquility?_'. Uros thought about it for a moment, then frowned when he realized that none of the Fleet's records, for the past four months, had made any mention whatsoever of the Minister of Tranquility. How does a Fleet house such a high-ranking official without even mentioning anything about it in their archives? It was a huge deal even when assistants of Lesser Prophets were dispatched to the fleets, let alone a full _Minister_—

This presented Uros with a clear answer to the question indirectly posed to him by that text file. The previous Minister of Tranquility had evaded any and all forms of mention in the records of the Second Fleet of Righteous Vigilance because he had never _been_ with the Second Fleet of Righteous Vigilance.

So where, then, had he gone? How had he died? Why would the Prophets lie about the circumstances of his death? What had he done? Or what had he known? Uros shook his head, staving off the endless onslaught of questions that tore through his mind. He closed out the FLEET-RECs folder and opened up the folder marked 'MoT'. The image that appeared on the screen of his datapad was the personal identity record of a middle-aged San 'Shyuum. From his picture, he was beginning to cross over into the more senior years of his life, judging by his skin color and the length of his beard.

Uros read through the date, place of birth, and the common name without much interest. He then arched a brow when he read through the list of government positions this San 'Shyuum had held. This individual had certainly been busy during the later years of his lifeâ€¦ Uros's other brow callus slid up his forehead to join its twin when the Councilor saw the final entry in the list: _Minister of Tranquility,_ along with the date on which he had started his term of office. This was the person the man in the shadows seemed to have so much interest inâ€¦ the person with so much mystery surrounding his death. Uros now knew that the man in the shadows wanted him to investigate thisâ€¦ to find out, perhaps, how he had really diedâ€¦ and _why_. If a Minister vanished so suddenly into the ether, there had to be an explanation.

Feeling a slight tingle of excitement playing along his spine, Uros scrolled back up to the top of the file and looked back at the San 'Shyuum's identity. If he wanted to find out more about the former Minister, Uros knew that the key to those answers was the San 'Shyuum's common name.

"_Fading Dusk_â€¦" the Councilor murmured.

11. I Chapter 11: Cleansing

Chapter Eleven: Cleansing

****9****th****** Age of Reclamation, 13****th****** Cycle
>Human World - 'Eden', Unknown System

Niro****

Shipmaster Niro 'Ovarumee stared at his heartpiece, as if he believed that he could simply will it through the opposition to the other side of the board. He and his opponent were bleeding each other dry, but neither had gained an advantage over the other quite yet. Finally, Niro made a decision and slid one of his twins to a square that put it close to a position where it could threaten his opponent's sunpieceâ€¦ the most powerful piece in the game. That was not a move that could easily be ignored.

Fading Dusk, the middle-aged San 'Shyuum who was serving as the _Sacrosanct's_ Deacon, leaned forward, scrutinizing the Shipmaster's latest move. "_Mm_â€¦" he hummed quietly. "It has been quite a while since a game of strategos has lasted this long for me. You possess a measure of skillâ€¦"

"Gratitude," Niro bowed his head slightly, in thanks to the compliment.

But the Deacon was not finished. He slid one of his remaining tricksters over to the square next to the central platform, which threatened Niro's heartpiece. "But I'm afraid the measure I possess is slightly larger."

Niro's mandibles twitched in irritation. With his heartpiece threatened, Niro could not use his twin to take the Deacon's sunpiece. Before he could do anything else, he had to move his heartpiece to safety, which he didâ€¦ allowing the Deacon to bring his sunpiece forward and knock out one of the Shipmaster's

twins.

"_Damnation_â€|" Niro muttered. The Deacon's white pieces were beginning to sorely outnumber Niro's red ones. The odds of victory for the Shipmaster were not growing. "A most effective maneuverâ€|"

Shipmaster and Deacon continued to spar with one another across the strategos board, red versus white. The game slowly progressed until Fading Dusk finally managed to break through Niro's line, pushing his heartpiece through to the opposite end of the board, winning him the game. The Shipmaster tipped over his own heartpiece, leaning back in his chair. "Your victory," he conceded. "A well-earned victory if ever I saw one."

"Don't agonize over it too much," the Deacon chuckled, idly moving his pieces back to their original places. "Time I have spent playing this game is time _you_ have spent doing useful thingsâ€|doing the Prophets' will, fighting for the cause, slaughtering Humans like livestock, setting their worlds on fire, etcetera, etceteraâ€|" he rattled off the list as if he were talking about household chores.

Niro's mandibles clicked together once, the Shipmaster's only physical response to what the Deacon had said. The tick had been really subtle, but there was not much that eluded the Deacon. Though Fading Dusk had a sudden urge to ask the Shipmaster about his perceived discomfort, he decided that being so direct about it would no doubt make things awkward. He decided to take a different route.

"You have been here in the dining hall, sparring with me, for several hours, now," the Deacon remarked. "Or should I say 'units'? My point is that this is the longest you have ever set foot outside the bridge since we arrived in this system. Any particular reason why?"

"My presence on the bridge is no longer such a necessity," Niro replied, somewhat hastily. When the Shipmaster saw the Deacon still staring at him, waiting for more of an answer, he went on, trying to satisfy the San 'Shyuum's curiosity. "Activity on the ground has subsided. My mind usually requires distraction beforeâ€|" his voice gradually trailed off.

Fading Dusk was still not satisfied, but he decided to relent. The Shipmaster was clearly bothered by something, but there was a limit to how much of his discomfort he would acknowledge, and that limit had been reached. If the Deacon wished to push past that limit, he would have to be patient.

"Perhaps a round of moonwhiskey?" the Deacon suggested, but the Shipmaster quickly shook his head. There was a stretch of silence that followed, and when it was clear that Niro was not going to continue the conversation by himself, Fading Dusk's fingers brushed across the pouch holding the game pieces. "Another match of strategos, then? Anything to do away with these infernal awkward silences."

The Shipmaster did not have the chance. Even as he opened his mouth to answer, he saw the entrance doors to the mess hall hiss open, saw his second-master walk in, saw the grim resolve in his stride, in his

eyes. Niro already knew what was coming.

Uilar 'Tahamee strode across the mess hall, approaching the table occupied by the Shipmaster. "_Deacon,_" the second-master exchanged a brief nod with Fading Dusk before meeting the Shipmaster's gaze. "Orders have come in from Fleetmaster 'Ahrmonree. It is time."

Niro suppressed a sigh, slowly rising to his feet. He gave a single nod to no one in particular and made his way towards the entrance doors, all too aware of Fading Dusk's prying gaze burning into his back. The Shipmaster and the second-master made the walk from the mess hall to the bridge in silence. Uilar knew how much Niro disliked this particular aspect of his commandâ€”trying to make conversation with him would have been pointless.

The Mgalekgolo bond brothers stationed on the bridge gave a rumbling hum of greeting as the Shipmaster entered the bridge. The officers all stood at attention, bowing their heads in a salute to their Shipmaster. Normally they would not act so formally towards Niro's arrival, but this was something of a special occasion.

"As you were," Niro allowed them to return to their posts, settling down into the commander's chair.

Uilar retrieved a data crystal from 'Teharolee at the comm station and handed it to the Shipmaster. "Cleansing orders," he stated.

Niro took the crystal and scanned its contents into his datapad. Encryption symbols streamed across the screen of his datapad for a few moments before Niro entered his decryption code, translating the meaningless jumble of data into something he could understand. The Shipmaster read through the orders, murmuring them to himself as he went. The Fleetmaster had provided him with coordinates to position the _Sacrosanct_ in high orbit over the Human world, as well as the exact time at which the cleansing was to begin. The chronometers of all vessels in the Covenant Navy were perfectly synched with each other; providing a time in the cleansing orders would ensure that all the ships in the fleet would begin at exactly the same moment.

Also included in the orders were coordinates of a small area of the planet below that was to be left untouchedâ€”the Forerunner artifacts that had been detected on this world were located in this area, as well as the fleet's infantry forces. The Shipmaster made a note of those coordinates, even though they were nowhere near the area allotted to the _Sacrosanct_.

Niro gave his second-master the time specified in the cleansing orders, then ordered the operations officer to reduce power to all nonessential systems. He was going to need as much power as he could get from the reactor. After everything was in order, 'Nelasee engaged the engines and brought the _Sacrosanct_ to the coordinates specified by the cleansing orders.

"Ten minutes to zero-time," Uilar said, keeping an eye on his timepiece.

Niro gave him a nod of acknowledgment, but made no other sound, sitting silently in his chair. He had been both dreading and looking forward to this: dreading it because he considered it dishonorable to attack the enemy in such a way that prevented them from fighting

backâ€"at least, that's what he told himselfâ€"which denied him a fair fight; but also looking forward to it because he simply wanted to get it over and done with. Regardless of whether or not he approved of the cleansing, it was going to happenâ€"so why would he want to prolong the wait?

"_Eight minutes to zero-time_."

"Switch to lower view," Niro ordered. As he requested, the viewscreen changed from a forward view and started showing what was beneath the ship. The bridge crew was rewarded with an almost breathtaking view of the planet belowâ€"a brilliant green tropical forest with sparkling oceans in the distance, overlaid with wispy cirrus clouds.

That was going to change.

"_Seven minutes to zero-time_."

The Sacrosanct had the privilege of being positioned near the Sacred Flameâ€"the Fleetmaster's vessel; they were able to witness the Branding. The Branding was the opening ritual of a cleansing, performed by a Fleetmaster and presided over by a Prophet from the Ministry of Tranquility. Before the overall cleansing of a planet commenced, the surface of the world would first be branded with a glyph from the San 'Shyuum languageâ€"which was very closely derived from the speech of the Forerunners.

Niro was unable to see the Sacred Flame, but he was able to see its energy projector beam slam into the surface of the planet, sending a shockwave and a furious ring of fire roaring outward in all directions, massive enough to be seen from orbit. Niro rose to his feet, stepping down from the command platform and standing right in front of the viewscreen, watching the energy beam move in a wide arc across the surface of the planet.

"_Five minutes to zero-time_."

Slowly but surely, Fleetmaster 'Ahrmonree's energy projector burned a glyph into the surface of the planet below. The beam was on a much higher intensity than the others would be, resulting in a significantly deeper scar. Uilar was reporting one minute to zero-time by the time the Fleetmaster successfully completed the Branding. The glyph glowed brightly, the land still molten from the high-intensity precision bombardment.

"Penanceâ€|" Niro murmured quietly, translating the San 'Shyuum glyph into AnÃ§ic. "We destroy them with penance."

Silence fell over the bridge crew once more, broken only when Uilar reported thirty seconds to zero-time. The Shipmaster turned around and approached the tactical station. "I will perform the cleansing," he said to R'lyes 'Suruinee, the weapons officer, who stepped aside, yielding the tactical station.

Niro input the appropriate commands, powering up the secondary energy projectorâ€"the one mounted under the bow of the cruiser, right near the prime gravity lift.

"_Ten seconds to zero-time_."

Niro glanced at the panel on the side of the console, taking a deep breath as Uilar counted down. The Human Navy had retreated from the system after evacuating a number of civilians from the surface of the planet, but there was no way they could have saved the entire population. The Shipmaster wondered how many Humans were down thereâ€|huddled up in their homes, wandering their ruinsâ€| He wondered if any of them knew what was about to hit them.

Uilar finished the countdown. "Fourâ€| Threeâ€| Twoâ€| Oneâ€| Shipmaster, we have reached zero-time."

This time, Niro did not give any form of reply. He simply placed his palm onto the panel. The dormant panel flared to life, the dark, linear patterns etched onto its surface now glowing with a bright, cyan light. And with that, the cleansing beam fired.

Niro saw the beam of destruction break upon the surface of the world belowâ€|the viewscreen provided a perfect view for that. Elsewhere, all over the planet, the other ships of the Second Fleet of Righteous Vigilance were doing the exact same thing, cleansing the planet along its major latitudes and longitudes. There was something breathtaking about watching the processâ€|seeing the energy beam strike the surface, witnessing the great fires tear through all kinds of landâ€|Forests, plains, desertsâ€|all were blasted away, obliterated by the might of the Covenant Navy.

This was the twelfth Human world whose destruction Niro had taken part in. For Niro, the invigorating feeling of commanding such a destructive force quite literally in the palm of one's hand had faded after the first few cleansings. By now, he felt nothing at all. He guided the _Sacrosanct's_ cleansing beam across the forests below as if in a trance, watching impassively as the lush, green expanses succumbed to the fury of the fires left in the cleansing beam's wake.

Soon, the cleansing beam began burning through a vast region that was obscured by a thick white screen of steam. This was one of the Human world's oceans. While the majority of the vessels in the fleet were cleansing the planet along its latitudes and longitudes, there were other ships that had been stationed at strategic locations over the world's bodies of water. They would focus their energy projectors to their highest settings and remain stationary as they bombarded the oceans. This would eventually vaporize the entire ocean. Naturally, the deeper the ocean was, the longer it would take to cleanse.

The Shipmaster did not move a muscle. He remained rooted to the spot, as still as a helioskrill lying in wait for an unsuspecting mole to skitter past. The only part of him that was moving was not even a part of himâ€|it was the bright, hellish destruction taking place down on the surface, reflected in his unblinking eyes. It actually matched the amber color of his irises, although no one was close enough to make such an observation.

Soon, the cleansing beam raged across land once more, leaving the ocean behind. 'Nelasee kept the _Sacrosanct_ moving, but never at any great speed. Cleansing was a slow and methodical process that could not afford to be rushed. Niro did not know how long it took his ship to make a complete orbit around the planet's circumference. Time had lost any meaning for him. Sometimes it felt like days, other times it

felt like minutes.

After the planet had been cleansed in that linear fashion, the organization of the Fleet broke down somewhat as the ships began cleansing the myriad areas in between those paths of destruction. This was the time-consuming portion of the process—the crude foundations of the cleansing had been laid, and now they had to add the finer touches in order to complete their task.

It took the Fleet eighteen hours to burn the Human world. Almost every part of Niro's body was aching when he removed his palm from the activation panel. His hand had been the only part of himself that he had been moving for the duration of the cleansing, guiding the energy projector beam in the path set down for it. Needless to say, he needed some rest. He could have easily yielded control of the cleansing to Uilar or one of the other bridge officers, but Niro always made it a point to make a cleansing his responsibility, and his alone.

The Human world had been completely transformed. The oceans, the trees and grass, the earth—all gone. It was impossible to see what the surface looked like. The planet's atmosphere—if it still even _had_ an atmosphere—was choked with a thick blanket of smoke, ash, and any number of other substances heaved into the sky by the planet-wide destruction. Parts of the black veil glowed with a soft red hue, the only visual evidence of the fires that were no doubt raging on the surface of the planet.

The only part of the surface that was clearly visible was the molten scar burned into existence by the _Sacred Flame,_ carved into the shape of the San 'Shyuum glyph that meant 'Penance'. There were murmurs from several members of the bridge crew, remarks on the beauty of the Branding, of satisfaction for another job well done.

Uilar did not say a word. He was well aware of his superior's opinions of ritual cleansing. The second-master was no avid supporter of it, either—but he did not dislike it with the same fervor as the Shipmaster. Like the Shipmaster, however, he was also wise enough to keep his personal opinions to himself—speaking out against the Prophets' doctrine was not exactly the smartest thing to do, in any situation.

Niro stepped back and yielded the tactical station back to 'Suruinee. He looked over to Uilar, met his gaze. "Second-master, you have the bridge."

"_Shipmaster,_" Uilar clasped his fist to his hearts and bowed his head in a salute, taking the command chair.

Niro took his leave and absconded, nodding respectfully to the Mgalekgolo bond brothers as he passed them by. He could feel the exhaustion that was pent up inside of him, but he was unable to succumb to it. He knew that he needed a rest, but he would not be able to sleep, not so soon after he had just helped kill a world. Instead, Niro commanded the lift to transport him to Deck Thirteen.

The Shipmaster stepped out of the lift and walked the corridors, passing by the hangar bay entrances, passing several residential

sections, until he arrived at the Shrine. The Shipmaster waited for the doors to hiss open before entering. The chamber was dimly lit, and the smell of incense lingered in the air. Fading Dusk was behind the altarâ€”which was adorned with filaments of Forerunner alloyâ€”polishing its obsidian surface.

The Deacon looked up from his work. "It is finished?" he asked.

"It is finished," Niro echoed, his voice quiet and subdued. "Another shard of glass for the Sanctumâ€”" the Shipmaster's voice trailed off and he was silent for a few moments. He shook his head, as if being roused from a daydream, met the Deacon's gaze once more. "I believe I am ready to take you up on that round of moonwhiskey."

* * *

><p>END OF SECTION I

12. II Chapter 12: Initiation

****Section II: Valor****

* * *

><p>Chapter Twelve: Initiation

****9****th****** Age of Reclamation, 16****th****** Cycle
>Human World â€” 'Crassus', Unknown System

**Aten**

I could not look at the fire for very long without feeling like my face was about to blister and peel off from the intense heat. The warmth of the flames was a welcome respite from the bitter cold that held this region of the world in its grasp, but I still would not have minded stepping back a few paces from the fireplace.

Timber from the partially-destroyed roof of the house I was in was what was fueling this fire. I do not know what kind of wood it was, but it popped somewhat loudly and gave off a strongâ€”though not necessarily unpleasantâ€”odor.

I was holding a metal rod with a brand fixed onto the end into the heart of the flames; obviously, the part I was holding was insulated with cloth and rubber so that I did not burn my hand off. I pulled it out of the fireplace, inspecting the brand at the end, which was glowing with the heat. Not quite satisfied, I thrust it back into the fireplace, allowing it to heat up a little more.

This was the first time the Q'Rumno had been given a rest since the long, bloody advance through the mountain ranges that now lay behind us. Integrated combat legions were now pushing ahead of our current position, laying siege to the Human cities that lay in the direction of the coast. And so, with a brief respite from the winter war raging across this hemisphere of the world that the Humans called _Crassus_, there were many issues that the Q'Rumno was now able to address and resolveâ€”some of them official, and othersâ€”off the record.

The brand which I was heating in the flames had to do with one of

these 'off the record' issues. The brand itself was the Forerunner glyph for _valor_ with the AnÃ§ic rune for 'Q' emblazoned in the middle. The unofficial symbol of the Q'Rumno.

"_Aten_."

I glanced over my shoulder. Nuren, one of the older astiros of the Third Element, was poking his head through one of the windows. Checking on my progress, no doubt.

"Is the brand ready?" the other warrior asked.

I shook my head. "Another two minutes should be sufficient."

Nuren's mandibles clicked with impatience. "Bring it outside to the fire when it is ready, will you?"

I gave the astir a nod, turning my attention back to the fireplace. I slowly rotated the brand ninety degrees, making sure the distribution of the heat did not become unbalanced. The glimmer of excitement deep in my chest started to grow steadily. My two closest friends had no idea what was about to hit them tonightâ€|just as _I'd_ had no idea when it had happened to me, over seven months ago. Tonight was going to be a night for them to remember. And the timing was perfectâ€|after the advance across these frozen plains, we needed something to rouse our wearied minds.

Another three minutes later, I pulled the brand back out of the fire. The heat of the fire had turned the brand a bright, glowing yellow. It was ready.

I exited the room and walked out of the house via the eastern wall, which no longer existed, blown away by the furious plasma bombardment that had taken place here when this area had still remained in Human hands. Luckily, the winds had died down, which made the cold easier to bear. Our combat harnesses had temperature controls that kept us warm, but they did not always keep us comfortable, and cold winter winds were more than enough to shatter any measure of comfort.

The oronos were all encamped in the ruined houses on this street, while the astiros had the pair of undamaged homes in the cul-de-sac. The veterans had started up a bonfire in the yard between these two former homesâ€|this did not happen every nightâ€|but tonight was a special occasion. I walked across the street and headed into the circle of firelight. The fifty-odd astiros of the Third Elementâ€|including our Field Officer, Ta'rel 'Neiasreeâ€|sat around the fire in small camp chairs, tree stumps, and other makeshift seats. When they saw me approaching, Eolisâ€|the senior astirâ€|gave Nuren a nod.

Nuren slipped off into the darkness with three others. I took my place around the fire with the others, sitting on a short log with room for three. I was currently alone on the log, but I wouldn't be for very much longer. As I took my seat, I held the end of the branding iron into the bonfire to keep it heated.

Marel, who was sitting on the tree stump to my right, gave a low chuckle, gestured at the superheated branding iron. "The best part is always the look in their eyes when they see it," he said.

I had to agree. I had not flailed when I'd seen it myself, seven months ago, but there had definitely been a moment of intense surprise, of nervousness at the idea of superheated metal coming into contact with my flesh. But afterwards, when I was able to watch others go through the same thingâ€|it was amusing, watching someone else squirm, about to undergo something you had already been through.

Within the next few minutes, Nuren and the other astiros returned, escorting none other than my friends Y'mir and Oros over to the makeshift platform set in front of the bonfireâ€|composed of several of the larger equipment canisters. My friends looked around quizzically, not knowing exactly why they had been brought to the astiros' fireâ€|the veterans rarely ever allowed the oronos into their close company.

Eolis climbed up onto the platform and raised his hand, calling for silence. The astiros all quieted down at the behest of their brother. "We are a minority," the senior astir declared, looking around the fire, meeting our gazes. "There are many who become Proselytes, there are many who pass the trials and join the ranks of the warrior crÃ"ches...and there are many who then take the Journey and join the venerated dead. That is the path of the majorityâ€|and it is a path that none of us have followed. It is a path that you, Y'mir 'Tahamee, and you, Oros 'Kusovee have not followed. And so, you join the ranks of a different kind of honored warriorâ€|the venerated living. And because becoming an astir is, as I said, no small feat, we believe you should be given aâ€|" the senior astir searched for an appropriate word for a few moments, before settling on, "gift...to remember the occasion by."

Amused laughter arose all around the campfire at Eolis's choice of words. He was right; it was a giftâ€|although those of us who were at the immediate receiving end of the gift had not quite agreed with this sentiment at the time.

Eolis nodded over to me. "Aten, the gift if you please?"

Grinning wolfishly, I withdrew the branding iron from the fire and made my way around to the platform, inverting the iron and presenting it handle-first to the senior astir. Eolis took the iron and held it up to the skies, as if it were a sword of legend. He then leveled it straight at my two friends.

"Approach."

As Y'mir and Oros stepped forward, Nuren and the others removed the torso sections of their combat harnesses, as well as their helmets, leaving them half-naked in the cold. Y'mir stepped up onto the platform, where the senior astir commanded him to kneel. The islander sank to a knee and had just enough time to take in a deep breath before Eolis thrust the branding iron forward. The superheated metal made contact with his flesh with an unsettling noise that sounded like meat sizzling in a pan.

I suppressed the urge to cringe. This was not the first time I had witnessed this particular ritual, but I'd never gotten used to the sound of flesh getting seared.

Y'mir endured the pain like any true warrior shouldâ€|he barely

flinched, keeping all of his screaming inside his own mind. I was close enough to hear the low, barely audible grunt of pain, but the islander made no other sound. Many have criticized him for his eccentric humor and mannerisms, but no one could say that he lacked the heart and soul of a warrior.

Eolis pulled the branding iron away, turned to the side, beckoned Oros to climb up onto the other side of the platform. The process was repeated—the senior astir commanded the Urassan to kneel, pressed the branding iron to his chest, searing the small symbol over Oros's left-side heart.

"Congratulations, warriors..._astiros,_" Eolis gave a faint smile. "You now have a future."

"To hell with having a future," Y'mir grunted as he shrugged his combat harness back on. "What I would rather have is a stiff pint of rum!"

Silence fell over the astiros who sat in the firelight once more. This was probably the first time a new astir had ever even spoken during the initiation—during my own initiation, I'd simply stepped down from the platform, taken my place in the circle, and did my best to forget the burning pain. I certainly had not cracked jokes—but then, I was not Y'mir.

After the brief lapse of silence, laughter rose up from the circle of astiros. Even Eolis joined in the laughter, exchanging several quiet words with my friend before allowing them to leave the platform and join the circle.

I had laughed as well, but not at Y'mir's remark. No, I found amusement in the fact that everyone else believed Y'mir had been joking. "I fear that mouth of yours will be the death of you, never mind the Humans—"

"And what a death it will be!" the islander beamed, sitting down on my log.

"Assuming _I_ don't silence you first—" Oros muttered, taking a seat at the other end of the log, next to the islander.

The relationship between Y'mir and Oros was one of the most complex, bizarre friendships I have ever seen. I got on well enough with both of them, but with each other—much of their conversations could be summed up with spiteful jabs, slurs concerning their respective ethnicities, sarcasm, insults—If you did not already know the two warriors, you would probably think they hated each other. But the friction between the two of them was simply the way they interacted—it was the veneer of the friendship, not the core.

The initiation ritual was concluded with the branding. There was no feast, no great celebration to welcome Y'mir and Oros into our ranks, no words of congratulations, no pats on the back. Most, if not all of the traditions and customs of warriors in the field were similarly low-key. When a dead man survived his first battle, the fact that the others ceased to treat him like he was a ghost was enough of a gift. When a veteran oron was elevated into the ranks of the astiros, the acceptance of the senior members of the crÃche was more of a treasure than any formal ceremony could ever hope to match.

Though they were doing their best to hide it, I could see that my companions were clearly still in pain. I leaned over to them, pulling down my thermal skinsuit far enough to expose the symbol of the Q'Rumno that was over _my_ left heart. After seven months, the scars from my own branding had faded from an angry red to an ashen colorâ€”not pitch black, but still dark enough to be seen against my dark brown skin. "The pain will subside a little by morning," I said to them, "and it will fade within the week."

I still remembered with fondness my own initiation. The pain of the crÃ“che mark, the warming glow that grew in my hearts as I took my place with the veterans, the feeling of complete acceptance. There was no longer anyone in the Q'Rumno who could look down on me. I am certain that my friends were having similar feelings.

And they had earned them. While the rest of the crÃ“che was occupied with capturing the strongpoints of the Human defenses in this region, Y'mir and Oros had led a detachment of oronos against the enemy's artillery. While they did not destroy the Human artillery nests completelyâ€”it would have taken armored support to accomplish thatâ€”they _were_ able to maul the vermin badly enough to force them to fall back.

It was customary to wait until the end of a battle before welcoming veterans into the ranks of the astiros, but Field Officer 'Neiasree had discreetly suggested to Eolis that we do it tonight, for reasons unknown.

After the initiation, the din around the bonfire quieted down as weariness began to take hold. Y'mir was the only one of us to break the silence. He was gazing deep into the fire. Shadows danced across his face, and the flames reflected in his eyes, masking the green in his irises. He then began to murmur softly, to himself, and perhaps to us, "_Lo, on the tides of Winter's breath, our enemies greet us with gifts of Deathâ€” Their blood soaks our shores as we answer Death with War, a stain on our lands we shan't soon forgetâ€”|_"

I faintly recognized the poetry that my friend was reciting. It was one of a series of four poems written by Azaire 'Taham, who had served as Kaidon of his state during the Strife of Tears. It was an ancient war that had raged all across the globe millennia ago, long before the War of Unity. While the Strife itself could be discussed in great detail for years on end, the poem Y'mir was reciting referred to a period in the war when a combined army, spearheaded by the extinct Khewan Clan, seeking to gain a foothold from which they could begin their planned conquest of Yermo and the Western Massif, invaded the Taham Archipelago. The four poems were named after the four seasonsâ€”Autumn speaking of the islands in all their beauty; Winter speaking of the Khewan invasion of the Archipelago, the sorrow and desperation of Azaire's army as they were pushed to the very fringes of their home; Spring speaking of the coming of the monsoons, the storms and the rainsâ€” The destruction wrought against the Khewan-led invasion force, the patience of Azaire's forces as they waited for Nature to smile upon them once more; and, finally, Summer speaking of Azaire's victory over the battered and exhausted enemies.

Y'mir was uttering the Winter poem, which I suppose was appropriate, given the weather in this region of the planet. We were not a

desperate remnant of an army on the verge of defeat, like the Taham forces from the poemâ€|but then, I rarely ever question why Y'mir says the things he does.

By the time the islander finished the poem, even the quiet conversation around the fire had dwindled and faded to silence. The seconds ticked by, blending together into minutes. In this weather, there were no sounds of nature to fill the void, only the crackling pop of the bonfire as it died down into smoldering embers, and the low, ambient breath of the wind.

Before any of us could retire for the night, Field Officer 'Neiasree rose from his camp chair. He opened his mouth, started to speak, then seemed to change his mind. Instead, he made his way around the remains of the bonfire and stepped up onto the makeshift platform so that he could be seen by everyone in the circle.

"The Field Master received orders from orbit, earlier this afternoon," the Field Officer announced. "The Fleetmaster has been ordered to begin the cleansing of this world on the morrow. All ground forces have been recalled to the fleet. We will be returning to the _Sacrosanct_ after sunrise."

I frowned, outrage beginning to boil deep within my hearts. The Humans here were not yet defeatedâ€"what right did the Navy have to rob us of our glory on the battlefield? It was insulting to the infantry to pull us away from battle while the enemy still had a fight left in it. As we started to voice our protests, the Field Officer raised his hand, quelling us with a glare. "These orders came straight from the Prophets themselves; there will be no disputing them. Now rest, my brothersâ€"if we are decreed by Fate to meet our deaths, it shall not be on this world." The Field Officer, finished speaking, stepped down from the platform and slipped away into the darkness.

While I'm sure that we all still had more than our fair share of things to say about the premature pull-out, getting some much-needed sleep was a higher priority. Learning to grab extra sleep whenever possible was one of the first habits that became drilled into us as we started learning the ropes of warfare. Of _surviving_ warfare, rather. Following this principle, I continued to voice my grievances with the others, but only after we were standing up and heading back into one of our houses.

"This is out of character for the Prophets, no?" I finally said to Nuren when we made it indoors. And I was right; the Zealots always made it a point to send in ground forces to defeat the Humans before cleansing their worldsâ€"it would be viewed as dishonorable to simply burn them from orbit without meeting them in battle. And the Prophets, though they did not necessarily share this view, never usually interfered with our way of conducting warfare. Prematurely ending this battle was, as I saidâ€|out of character for them.

The older astir threw me a sidelong glance as he lay down in the blackened, burned remains of a couch, burying himself in his bedroll. "Aten?" he grunted from under the thermal blanket. "You're thinking. Stop thinking."

I took the hint and grabbed my own bedroll, which I had stowed in one of the corners. Y'mir and Oros had to retrieve their gear from one of

the other houses, so they did not join me for another quarter unit. We all laid down our bedrolls behind the couch, sleeping close to one another for heat.

When I had first joined the Q'Rumno, there were nine of us who had been assigned to the Third Element. Y'mir, Oros, and I were the only ones from that group who were still alive. Over the last three years, the others had all died in the various battles we had taken part in ever since Eden. And somehow we were the ones who continued to draw breath. And now all three of us were part of the astiros. However, unlike many of my peers, I'd never once questioned why I had managed to last so much longer than most of the others. Such things were beyond my comprehension. And, ultimately, knowing the answers would not change a thing. I would still be alive, the dead would remain dead. So why agonize?

One of the other astiros gradually dimmed the plasma torch in the center of the room, bringing the light down until the torch went out, plunging the room into darkness. We gathered our thermal blankets tightly about ourselves and huddled up, making our departure from the waking world into the realm of dreams.

I closed my eyes. Questions still buzzed feebly around my mind, questions about our sudden pullout but my weariness quickly brought them to heel, and they meekly subsided, leaving nothing but the faint sound of the wind outside.

13. II Chapter 13: Off The Record

Chapter Thirteen: Off The Record

9**th**** Age of Reclamation, 16****th**** Cycle
>High Charity

**Uros**

When he wasn't busy with the trappings of his office, Uros 'Oenairemee spent most of his time in the Inner Circle or the Middle Districts. In the three cycles since he had arrived in the Holy City, the Councilor still had yet explore all of the districts and their wonders, but he had still experienced a great deal. In his eyes, it was no substitute for the Homeworld but, as foreign places go, the Holy City was quite a place to live.

And then, there was the Outer Ring. The outermost region of the Holy City, comprised mostly of dense, sprawling industrial sectors and residential areas. Though many of the residential areas seemed more like ghettos than proper communes; at least, that was the Councilor's opinion of them. The Ring was inhabited by diverse population of San 'Shyuum who somehow fell out of favor with the higher-ups, as well as various communities of Unggoy, Kig-yar, and Mgalekgolo. As far as Uros knew, there were no Sangheili who dwelled there the Sangheili inhabitants of High Charity lived either in the Inner Circle, or the Districts around the Southern Radius. But members of all species visited the Outer Ring for one reason or another, so Uros's presence would not be such a rare occurrence.

Still A Councilor gracing the streets of the Outer Ring was bound to draw attention, and _attention_ was one thing Uros did not want,

not for this particular errand. And so, when Uros left his home early in the morning, he was not wearing any part of his Councilor's attire. He was not even wearing anything particularly nice; pants, shirt, and a traveler's cloak—all of them varying shades of gray. Not exactly disheveled, but certainly nothing that would attract attention.

The Councilor walked to Yhire Commune and hopped a transport to the Western Radius Station, and then to Anarys District, which was located on the border between the Middle Districts and the Outer Ring, not far from the Southern Radius. He could have acquired additional transportation—after all, his destination was over an hour's walk away—but he refrained from doing so. Whenever he went to visit his contact in the Outer Ring, he always walked there; no one could trace him there if he walked.

As he crossed the threshold from Anarys into the Ring, Uros pulled the hood of his cloak over his head, obscuring most of his face. This was not unusual, either—Uros was not the only person with off-the-record business in the Outer Ring. The Councilor made his way down the labyrinthine streets, with which he had forced himself to become familiar a long while ago. He passed through a dense residential sector—makeshift hovels, ramshackle apartment complexes, taverns, pubs; all of them jumbled together in a haphazard, puzzle-like arrangement.

Uros turned down a small, partially-hidden side street. It was almost more like an alley than an actual street—the Councilor was certain that vehicles never used it. For that matter, there were not many vehicles in the whole of the outer ring, either; most of the traffic, these days, was up in the sky. Uros's destination was a cantina called the Azure. It was a seedy little place, owned by a reclusive Sangheili who Uros knew as 'Sentinel'. A small group of musicians was playing a lively tune off to the side, near the bar. The cantina had a good number of regulars, mostly lower-class San 'Shyuum and a few Kig-yar. They sat at the tables or hunched over their drinks at the bar counter. A handful of the Kig-yar were passed out over one of the tables—one of them had even fallen completely onto the floor, where it lay snoring.

Several of the patrons turned and glanced at Uros as he entered the Azure. Uros was not the only Sangheili to frequent the cantina, but members of his species were rare enough to warrant a round of semi-interested glances when they walked in. But even those interested glances went only so far—the regulars were all returning to the solitude of their drinks within half a second.

The Councilor strode past the tables and sat atop one of the barstools, waited patiently for the elderly San 'Shyuum behind the counter to attend to him. "Moonwhiskey," the Councilor said to the barkeep. As the San 'Shyuum bent down to get a glass, Uros leaned in close to prevent his words from being heard by anyone else, and murmured, "Rhall says business in the Ring goes well this season."

The barkeep said nothing in response. He filled Uros's glass with the requested moonwhiskey, set the glass down in front of the Councilor, and vanished into the backroom. Uros took a sip of the liquor, held the glass up to his eye, swirled it around once or twice. The barkeep returned a minute later. He set a napkin down onto the counter and

pushed it across to the Councilor.

Uros glanced down at the napkin. In the center of the napkin, someone had written _SERVICE ENTRANCE_. Uros crumpled the napkin up and tossed it into a nearby wastebasket. He threw his head back and finished off the moonwhiskey, clacking his mandibles together in pleasure. He then rose from the stool and walked back out of the cantina. He did not go out onto the street, however; he circled around to the back of the establishment and reentered through the service entrance, which opened into the kitchens in the back.

The Councilor made his way through the kitchen, avoiding the Unggoy workers. He pushed open the small door tucked into the corner, revealing a flight of rickety wooden stairs. Uros closed the door behind him, descending down into the basement.

The basement was actually a lot nicer than the cantina up above. The first time he had seen the basement, Uros had been pleasantly surprised. A red and orange carpet adorned the floor. There were a few paintings on the walls, as well as a couple of old-fashioned plasma lamps on the tables, providing more than enough illumination. An antique wooden table sat near the center of the room, complete with three matching chairs. One of the walls had also been converted into something almost resembling a bulkhead on a starship. Three separate computer consoles had been built into the wall, and it was from these computers that Sentinel was able to conduct most of his 'business', whatever that entailed.

The whole set-up was somewhat informal, but there were not many individuals who dealt directly with Sentinel. Uros, fortunately, was one of those individuals.

There was a thin, wiry, caramel-skinned man working fervently at the middle console. "You're earlier than I expected," he remarked without turning around. This man was Sentinel. That was not his real name, of course—Uros did not know Sentinel's real name. 'Sentinel' was simply the name used by others to refer to this man when discussing matters of import. All Uros knew about the man was that, for the right amount of payment, he would complete any job you gave him. The Councilor did not know how far this principle went, nor did he know just how extensive Sentinel's 'business' was—but, to be perfectly honest, Uros did not want to know. Sentinel was proving himself to be extremely useful, and so Uros was willing to remain blissfully ignorant of the other man's much more illegal ventures, if they existed.

"Problem?" Uros arched a brow, sitting down in one of the chairs.

"Problem? Hardly," the man shrugged, his concentration not affected in the slightest. "Merely an observation. If you would give me six—no, make that _seven_ more seconds—" he entered one last string of commands into the console before finally turning around to face the Councilor. "Now, to business. My technically-savvy subordinates reported to me last night, and I have spent a small amount of time verifying the authenticity of their findings. I am convinced that said findings are genuine. Now, then—your end of the bargain?"

Uros wordlessly reached into an inner pocket and drew out a sealed

envelope, tossing it across the room to Sentinel, who caught it one-handed. The caramel-skinned man opened the envelope and examined its contentsâ€”Uros's payment for his services. Satisfied that the Councilor had paid him fairly, Sentinel folded up the envelope and stuck it in a drawer. In return he produced a small data crystal, offered it to Uros. The Councilor took the crystal and returned to the table. He pulled out his datapad and started to scan the contents of the crystal.

"Do you require privacy?" Sentinel asked.

Uros shook his head. "That will not be necessary."

"Good," Sentinel returned to his console, "because I had no intention of leaving. You may go when you wish."

Uros gave a soft grunt, barely even listening to Sentinel anymore. He was staring at the screen of his datapad as the contents of the data crystal appeared in the form of a text file. At a quick glance, the Councilor saw that he was looking at a three-cycle-old entry from a Shipmaster's log. That would explain why it had taken so longâ€”nearly two cyclesâ€”for Sentinel to acquire what Uros had asked for; it would take some pretty deep, patient sifting to dig up individual Shipmaster log entries like this one. Given how long Uros had already waited, this log entry was probably his one and only lead. And it turned out to be a huge goldmine of information. Uros skipped past the header information and started reading the actual entry.

_Arrived at _Unyielding Heirophant,_ rendezvoused with the Fleet once more. Repairs to vessel completed â€” It is my hope that I shall not have to bring the ship in for repairs twice in a row. The wait was a long one, and while I have no issue with gracing the shores of our Homeworld for a time, the patience of the warrior crÃ”che usually grows thin. I do not want to see how they would react to being grounded again so soon._

Interesting turn of events after we rendezvoused with the Fleet â€” A Deacon was assigned to my vessel under some rather peculiar circumstances. My vessel has never had any issues concerning the spirituality of the crew, which (under ordinary circumstances) would negate any need for a Deacon. But even ignoring that, the individual who was sent to us defies the very essence of what a Deacon should be. He is a middle-aged Prophet â€” much older than a Deacon should be â€” who even acknowledged the fact that my vessel had no need of a Deacon. He stated that his presence on my ship was a matter of politics, not of faith. I know not what to make of this. He calls himself Fading Dusk, but other than his name I know nothing ofâ€”|

Uros stopped reading, his gaze zeroing in on the name. _Fading Dusk._ So much effort, so much time, so much waiting; all for this one, innocent little name. The former Minister of Tranquility's common name, which Uros could not find in any official recordsâ€”save for an innocuous Shipmaster's log entry from three cycles ago. And the time of this log entry was not very long after the former Minister's disappearance. This 'Fading Dusk' mentioned in the log was, without a doubt, the person Uros was searching for.

Remembering his wits, Uros dragged his finger down the screen,

scrolling back up to the top of the entry, looking for the name of the Shipmaster who had entered this log. He needed to find out whose log entry this was in order to determine Fading Dusk's location. He could hardly believe it when he found the name—the coincidence just made it all seem so unreal.

"_Niro_â€|" Uros murmured, staring at the name of his oldest friend. "Niro, may the Gods bless you a thousand times over for your personal logsâ€|"

The Councilor's hearts were pounding with excitement as he took his leave and returned to the streets. Ever since that mysterious individual had contacted him in the Ied Unnel Theatre, three cycles ago, and given him the name of the former Minister of Tranquility, the Councilor had spent over half a cycle scouring the records without success before he realized that, on his own, he had no hope of finding anything. He simply was not technologically savvy enough to know his way around the system, nor did he have time to learn—being a member of the High Council was not a job that came with an abundance of free time. This, as well as a few other reasons that Uros did not like to think about, was why the Councilor was forced to turn to alternative means.

It had taken a considerable amount of time and effort to arrange a meeting with Sentinel, but Uros had managed to achieve this within another cycle. It would have taken most people much longer to deal directly with Sentinel, but 'most people' were not Councilors. Being members of the same species had also smoothed things over—Sangheili always trusted each other infinitely more than the other Covenant races.

It had not been easy, waiting for Sentinel to find any trace of Fading Dusk in the Archives—the Councilor had no way of knowing if the former Minister was even alive. Uros did not think the man in the shadows would have had him pursuing a ghost for so long, but again, it was the lack of confirmation that had made the past two cycles such a long wait.

A wait which was now over.

The Councilor still had some small measure of trouble believing that the individual for whom he had been searching for so long had been serving on the very same ship as his oldest friend, and he'd had no idea. But now that he finally knew where Fading Dusk was, Uros could go about contacting him. The Councilor pondered how exactly he would be able to do this as he crossed over the threshold back into Anarys, weaving his way through the bustling streets towards the nearest transportation hub. It would not be nearly as simple as it sounded.

The fact that he was not as well-versed in technology as others was not the only reason why Uros had turned to Sentinel to gain his answers. After he had scoured the Archives for mention of Fading Dusk for that first half-cycle, Uros had been summoned to the Ministry of Penance. While there, he had been informed by the Minister that the Prophets had noticed Uros's efforts, and—in a nutshell—had told him to leave well enough alone. Though the Minister of Penance had not threatened him with consequences of any kind, it had been painfully clear to Uros that if he continued his investigations, bad things would happen to him.

And so, he had opted for a much more discreet method. And this discretion worked; he was not summoned to the Ministry of Penance again. And though Uros suspected the Prophets no longer had him under such a spotlight, he was still extremely wary, reluctant to do anything that would suggest he still had an interest in Fading Dusk. If he suddenly went out to the Second Fleet of Righteous Vigilance and visited the Sacrosanct, it would go on record, and he would have blown away any semblance of cover. The Ministry of Penance would put two and two together and realize that he had had contact with Fading Dusk and then there was no telling what would happen.

He could not simply say that he was there to visit Niro 'Ovarumee, either not even Councilors were allowed to go to the fleets for personal reasons. This left only one real option; Uros had to bring Fading Dusk to a safe meeting place. And to accomplish this he was going to need to cash in a giant favor.

This was a favor owed to Uros by Iessos 'Verrilee, one of the most senior Councilors, as well as a member of the Council of Resolution, which was the body of the High Council that directed the campaign against the Humans. He had also served as Uros's Fleetmaster back in the days of strife before contact had been made with the Humans. He was Uros's best bet and if he refused, Uros was sure Sentinel could find the skeletons in 'Verrilee's closet and force the older man's hand. But the Councilor fervently hoped it would not come to that.

Councilor 'Verrilee resided in the Inner Circle the Qilloa Commune to be precise. It took Uros roughly half a unit to get there. He had to acquire a transport from Anarys to the Northern Radius Station, and then a second shuttle to Qilloa. Compared to the quieter, more relaxed atmosphere of Yhire, which lay right at the fringes of a forest, Qilloa was larger, louder, and busier. It was set on and around the shores of an artificial lake.

Iessos 'Verrilee resided in a cottage close to the lakeshore. This was in-character for the man; Uros recalled that 'Verrilee who hailed from Verril State, which was a coastal province on the second-largest continent of Rapture, one of the oldest Sangheili colony worlds had been an avid fisherman during peacetime. While this lake would certainly be no substitute for the seas and rivers of Rapture, it was certainly better than nothing.

The Councilor walked across the small yard that surrounded the cottage. The senior Councilor's home was smaller than most of the other homes in Qilloa. There was most likely modern lighting, heating, and plumbing installed, obviously, but 'Verrilee made no effort to make his home seem anything more than what it appeared to be a small, simple wooden cottage. This was something Uros could respect about the older man.

Uros rapped on the door with his knuckle. He heard movement from within for a few moments before the door was opened from the inside, swinging inward to reveal the gray-skinned, black-eyed man who lived there. "Councilor," Uros bowed his head in respect.

Recognition flared in 'Verrilee's eyes. "Councilor 'Oenairemee," he nodded back to his visitor. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I would have words," Uros replied. "I require a favor from you."

'Verrilee arched a brow. Instead of stepping aside and allowing Uros entry to his home, as Uros had expected, he stepped outside and closed the door behind him. "Such matters are best discussed on the back porch, I find," the elder Councilor sighed, making his way around his cottage, gesturing for Uros to follow.

The two Councilors stepped up onto 'Verrilee's porch and sat down. It was a nice place—"right on the beach, a stone's throw from the lake itself. "You find this view enjoyable?" 'Verrilee asked his visitor, nodding over to the lake.

"It cannot compare with Sanghelios, I fear," Uros answered honestly. "But it serves well in the Homeworld's absence."

'Verrilee gave a grunt of agreement. "I have never understood the other races' fascination with the Holy City—I believe it is a wonder of technology to be able to have an environment like this in outer space, but it would be impossible for its beauty to match that of our worlds. The Prophets should find a proper planet to colonize, if you ask me—I But enough of this talk. You said you required a favor of me. I would have details."

"This conversation would best be kept between the two of us."

'Verrilee inclined his head slightly. "Naturally," he said.

"The Second Fleet of Righteous Vigilance is currently engaged in battle in the Ixan System, on a planet the Humans call 'Crassus'," Uros started to explain. "That fleet needs to be recalled and sent to Sanghelios on a shore leave."

The silence that followed Uros's declaration hung heavy in the air like a leaden blanket. 'Verrilee finally broke the silence by clearing his throat. "To what end? Moving a fleet on a whim is no small task," the elder Councilor remarked. "People will ask questions. You know how much I dislike it when people ask questions."

"I am not asking you to abort a battle," Uros continued to press his elder. "I have been reading the correspondences between the Council of Resolution and the Second Fleet of Righteous Vigilance's Council of Masters. The Human naval presence in the Ixan System has long since been neutralized. Right now, Fleetmaster 'Ahrmonree will be waiting for the ground forces to finish off the Humans on the surface. The fleet could easily be recalled at this stage—"order them to begin the cleansing, and then grant them shore leave before they are given a new assignment. It has been three cycles since that particular fleet has had a shore leave, so it will not be quite as suspicious as you think."

"Why should I do this?" 'Verrilee asked next. "What good will come from pulling 'Ahrmonree's fleet off the front lines?"

"Apologies; I cannot give you an answer without breaking a promise of silence," Uros answered evenly. "But you do not need to know my motives. I give you assurance that this will not in any way harm the

crusade against the Humans."

"I know you would do nothing of the kind, but you still have not answered my first question; why should I do this?" Councilor 'Verrilee repeated himself. "It seems to me like it will not accomplish very much. It seems like a waste of time and resources. Why should I do this?"

Uros took a deep breath. It was now or never. "Back in our Navy days, when you were my Fleetmaster... Remember Iuvon Prime? That honor-debt you swore to me after the battle? I'm willing to call it even if you give 'Ahrmonree's fleet the shore leave."

'Verrilee gave a grunt of surprise at that. "This shore leave is really so important for you?"

"It is."

'Verrilee was silent again for another few moments, digesting this new turn of events. After what seemed like a very long and drawn-out internal debate, he finally gave a sigh and said, "Very well, 'Oenairemee. I will have words with the rest of the Council of Resolution. We can issue orders to immediately begin the cleansing of that Human world. 'Ahrmonree's fleet will get its shore leave" he then leaned over toward Uros and extended a finger. "No more favors after this. If you come to me again with something like this, with as little information as you have already given me" I will say no, and that will be the end of it. Are we clear?"

Uros nodded, the glow of excitement beginning to seep back into his hearts. "We are."

The Councilor rose from his chair, exchanged farewells with his elder, and stepped off the porch. He did not speak as he threw himself back into the bustling streets of Qilloa Commune. The next two shuttle trips"first from Northern Radius Station to Western Radius Station, and then to Yhire Commune"were a blur for him. The walk from Yhire through the Blessed Silver Woods seemed to take only seconds before he found himself back at home.

The Councilor headed upstairs to his bedchamber and pulled his traveling bag out of the closet. He filled it with some of his clothing and personal effects before setting it down on his bed. He quickly disrobed and changed into a gray thermal skinsuit, the kind of layer worn under a combat harness.

Ouran 'Inzaunumee poked his head into the bedchamber, hearing all the noise Uros was making. "Going somewhere?" the other man queried.

Uros crossed over to his armor locker and opened it, staring at his Councilor's combat harness for a few seconds. He took out the chestpiece, turning back to Ouran. "I haven't had a single vacation in the three cycles I have served on the High Council," he said. "And so" Before I forget what it looks like, I believe it is high time I revisited the Homeworld."

Chapter Fourteen: A Taste of Truth

****9****th****** Age of Reclamation, 16********th****** Cycle
>Sanghelios, Urs Prime System

Niro****

Niro 'Ovarumee had seen many things during his service in the Navy. Some had been wondrous sights, the kind that he was likely to see only once in his lifetime, and others were sights he would much rather forget. But his favorite sight above all others did not truly fit into either category. He stood in front of the viewscreen, his heartbeat accelerating slightly in anticipation.

"Powering down FTL drives," Eyom 'Nelasee reported, inputting the appropriate commands into the helm. The taciturn navigator glanced up at the viewscreen. "Returning to real-spaceâ€|_now_."

A soft, rushing sound, not dissimilar to a light wind blowing through a cave entrance, enveloped the ship. And then the _Sacrosanct_ dropped back into the known dimensions, and the external sensors were suddenly able to process what was outside of the cruiser. Static washed over the viewscreen for a few moments before it fizzled out and resolved into an image of a blue and green planet, dappled with streaks of white clouds.

Home.

"Sangheliosâ€|" 'Yeromee murmured. "She grows more beautiful every time we return."

The Shipmaster shook his head once. "Her beauty remains the same," he said, "It is our own longing that grows with each passing cycle. Like the taste of food after a long spell of hunger."

Uilar cast Niro a sidelong glance, one of his brow calluses raised in curiosity, but the second-master did not speak. Whatever he had to say would obviously have been inappropriate to utter on-duty, on the bridge. Instead, the second-master glanced back down at the tactical console, checking for incoming transmissions.

Normally, communications would be handled by 'Teharolee, but when the _Sacrosanct_ was not in battle and the attention of the officer at the tactical station was not solely focused on battle, communications could be routed through the tactical console. 'Teharolee himself, in the meantime, would usually switch off with 'Yeromee at the operations station. And so, it was Uilar, not 'Teharolee, who informed him that they were being hailed by the _Sacred Flame_.

"Patch it through to the holotank," Niro rose from the command chair and brushed past the tactical station to the rear portion of the bridge, where the round holo-table rested. He laid his palm over the activation node, activating the table. Several different schematics and read-outs started to appear in front of Niro's eyes, but the Shipmaster banished them with a wave of his hand.

Uilar did as commanded, and the Shipmaster quickly found himself face-to-face with a hologram of Fleetmaster 'Ahrmonree. On the bridge of the _Sacred Flame_, the Fleetmaster would be standing at his own

holotank, watching a holographic Niro shimmer into existence. As 'Ahrmonree's phantom flickered into being, Niro clasped a fist to his left-side heart and bowed. "_Fleetmaster,_" he greeted his superior.

"Shipmaster 'Ovarumee," the Fleetmaster returned the salute. "When informed of our sudden shore leave in the middle of the battle, my only feeling was confusionâ€|but now that we have returned home, I confess that my well of complaints has run dry."

"As has mine, Fleetmaster," Niro was able to reply with full honesty. The orders for the premature cleansing had certainly been unusualâ€|but, to be truthful, it stung the pride of the Field Masters more than their naval counterparts. But an order from the Prophets was...wellâ€|an order from the Prophets. There was no ignoring it.

The Fleetmaster quickly veered the conversation back to the matter at hand. "Your battlegroup is to make port at Docking Array Nine. We shall be returning to our usual base in the South of Maeron. All officers are granted passes for the week. This shore leave, while premature, is still well-earned. That will be all. May honor light your path, Shipmaster."

Niro saluted his superior once again. "And yours as well." As the hologram fizzled out of existence, the Shipmaster stepped back onto the command platform. He nodded to the navigator. "You hear that, helm?"

"Course laid in for Docking Array Nine," Eyom 'Nelasee reported. Knowing the navigator, he had probably had the course already entered in and ready to go the moment he heard the Fleetmaster begin to speak.

"Very good. Second-master, relay our docking orders to the rest of the battlegroup," Niro said to Uilar, taking his seat as the _Sacrosanct_ fell into high orbit over Sanghelios. The Shipmaster's hearts continued to flutter with excitement. He longed to breathe the free air, once again.

The next few units were something of a blur to the Shipmaster. Making port at Docking Array Nine, meeting with the Dockmaster, and then with the dozen or so Shipmasters who were under his commandâ€|it all just seemed to fly right on by. Before he knew it, the Shipmaster was on a shuttle bound for the South of Maeron, along with most of the officers from his vessel. Minor repairs were going to be performed on the _Sacrosanct_, so every crewmemberâ€|save the complement of Huragokâ€|would be heading planetside.

The friction of reentry generated a hellish red glow that surrounded the exterior of the shuttle. Niro could see flames licking at the edges of his porthole. Other than the moderate rise in temperature in the shuttle's interior, however, there was no other indication that they were currently descending through the atmosphere of Sanghelios like a falling star. Once upon a time, the friction of reentry would cause a capsule to shake something awful, but advanced technology had made that a thing of the past.

Eventually, the shuttle pierced the cloud cover, and the white veil gave way to the brilliant blue-green of the Neris Ocean. A few

isolated islands could be seen standing firm against the ever-shifting form of the sea, but no other land was visible until Niro ducked his head down low so he could see the horizon. Instead of meeting the sky, the blue-green sea stretched into the distance and came into contact with a coastline, separating it from the heavens.

That was the South of Maeron. There was a military base not far from the coast, and it was there that the personnel of the Fleet of Righteous Fervor would be taking up residence for the duration of their shore leave. Unless, of course, they had passes to go to their homes.

Within ten minutes, the shuttle was landing. There were several tasks for Niro to complete upon disembarking—“assembling and accounting for his crew, meeting once more with his subordinate Shipmasters, and then again with Fleetmaster 'Ahrmonree. He also had to issue passes to those of his crew who wished to visit their homes, or leave the base for some other reason. By the time he was finished, it was nearly sunset. Having no energy left for any other activity besides sleep, the Shipmaster retired to his quarters.

The next couple days were rather uneventful. The Shipmaster fell into a routine—“three meals a day, separated by periods of exercise and sparring, altered by the occasional meeting with a member of his crew, or another of his brothers in the Fleet. And the Shipmaster was content, for the most part. He could burn only so many Human worlds before his soul needed a respite from the war. He would sometimes join his brothers in a pub for a drink, but he never had very much. He was wary of alcohol, especially after watching it nearly kill his friend Uros after the death of his wife. And, on a more practical note, it would simply not do for crewmembers of the _Sacrosanct_ to see their Shipmaster intoxicated.

The routine was finally broken three days after his arrival on Sanghelios, when Niro was summoned to the base's entrance. He could have taken a transport to the gates, but he preferred instead to walk. The Shipmaster entered the gatehouse and was delighted to find none other than his wife waiting impatiently at one of the entrances, in the middle of some sort of argument with the officer on watch.

Surra caught sight of the Shipmaster and gestured for him to approach. "Husband, would you kindly tell this blathering fool that I do not intend to sabotage this base? Do I look like a member of the bloody Servants? And why in the name of Aether's finest spirits wouldâ€”_Oh!_"

Surra was cut off midsentence when Niro seized her by the wrist and pulled her into a tight embrace. He had sent word to her after his arrival in the South of Maeron, but this was mostly just to inform her of his wellbeing—“he had not actually expected her to make the trip here from their keep in Rhei. After all, with Niro off fighting in the war, the responsibilities of running Ovarum State had fallen largely on Surra, as the Kaidon's wife. She would have been hard-pressed to find the time to take a mini-vacation to visit her husband—|but, obviously, she had managed.

The two lovers kissed, interlocking their jaws for several long moments before Niro remembered where he was. He pulled away, resting

his hands on his wife's shoulders. "How I've missed you, my little flame."

Surra hesitated for a beat, but her expression finally softened, and she returned the embrace. "Welcome home, my love. You have been gone too long. Ovarum needs its Kaidon."

"I fear Ovarum's wait must continue," Niro sighed. He conferred briefly with the officer on watch and secured approval for his wife's presence in the base. He took Surra by the arm and led her outside. "I am only here on shore leave. In a week's time, I will have to depart. Our time together will be brief."

"That depends on the week," Surra allowed a coy grin to slip through her composure.

Niro had been inducted as Kaidon of Ovarum State twenty-one cycles ago, and he had served in this capacity for nearly seven cycles, running his state with considerable success. But then war had broken out between the Humans and the Covenant, and it was not long before the High Council recalled Niro back into the Navy—leaving the task of keeping the Elders in check to Surra. She also had the help of Niro's uncle, Nirrys, and his sister, Aoive, in maintaining the family keep in Rhei, as well as several other members of the clan who assisted with the affairs of the city.

Niro had only seen his wife a bare handful of times since the start of the war, and it pained him to see how much she had been changed by her life as a Kaidon's wife and regent.

She had been born into a rather wealthy life in Vadam State as the daughter of an Armsmaster from the Iruiro Armory, south of the straits that separated the island-state of Ovarum from the Iruiro Region of western Yermo. Niro had taken her hand in marriage very soon after returning from his original term of service in the Covenant Navy, bringing her to his keep in southern Ovarum, where she quickly proved her adeptness at handling the political matters and civil duties of the keep, as was expected of an Elder's wife.

Her first slap in the face from reality was when she and Niro had their first and only son; Aerath. She had loved him very much, but she had been forced to give him up to the keep soon after his birth—it was the Sangheili custom for children to be raised communally in the state keeps, without any knowledge of their parents' identities. Aerath had grown up in the keep, right under Surra's nose—but she had not been allowed to have a relationship with him, and it had very nearly broken her heart. Now, he was off fighting in the war, along with many millions of other young men.

Then Niro had ascended to become the new Kaidon of Ovarum, provoking an attempt on his life by one of the Elders. The assassination was botched, however, and Surra ended up taking a knife to the chest, coming within a hairsbreadth of passing through the Gates of Aether and leaving Niro as a widower. Then, seven cycles later, Niro was swept back up into the Covenant Navy, leaving Surra to deal with the Elders.

Now, Niro could not help but notice how much deeper, how much more acidic her cynical streak had become, and it saddened him to see his

wife actingâ€|well, like _him_. Still, thoughâ€|at her core, she was still the fiery, mirthful woman Niro had marriedâ€"all it took was a little conversation to coax her back out of her grim shell. And perhaps at his own core, the Shipmaster was not a world-killer. They brought out the best in each other.

Already, Niro found that his stride was starting to lighten, his chest and shoulders starting to relax. "I had not expected your arrival," the Shipmaster admitted as they walked along the short road that eventually ran to the base headquarters and parade field, though they would not be following it that far. "I know as well as you the difficulty of finding free timeâ€|time enough to visit an undeserving husband, for example."

"I have long since mastered the skill of setting aside time for myself; sanity demanded it," Surra let out a quiet sigh. She then gave Niro's hand a light squeeze, adding, "And you're not as undeserving as you think."

"Niro 'Ovarumee, Kaidon of Ovarum State, Shipmaster of the Covenant Navy, Deserving Husband," Niro grinned. "Quite a Name I've made for myself, no?"

Surra pursed her jaws, pressing her mandibles tightly against each other. "Don't get ahead of yourself."

Niro turned down one of the smaller roads that branched off from the main road, which eventually led them to Officer Barracks Three, which was currently housing the officers of the _Sacrosanct_. Most of the officers had spent the first night in the barracks, but had then acquired passes to visit their homes. Uilar was one of the only officers who had remainedâ€"apparently, the Taham Archipelago was getting hammered by a typhoon, or a hurricane, or some other kind of maritime storm that prevented the _Sacrosanct's_ second-master from being able to return home.

"_It is better this way, perhaps,_" Uilar had said when Niro had questioned him about his remaining on the base. "_Returning now would be like giving a starving man a feast, and then taking it all away before he even finished the appetizer._"

Even now, Niro understood all too well what he meant. He knew that once Surra returned to the keep, his old longing for home would resurface.

And so, Niro was not surprised to see Uilar sitting in the barracks common room, sipping from a flagon of moonwhiskey. But he _was_ surprisedâ€"almost shocked, evenâ€"to see the tall, wiry, indigo-eyed man who was sitting across from the second-master, in the middle of a conversation about the old days in the Navy.

"Gods above, do my senses deceive me?" Niro asked, his hearts fluttering in excitement once more. "Or does my old friend Uros 'Oenairemee sit in this very room?"

"Well, if your senses are deceiving you, they have made an excellent choice of illusion," Uros chuckled, rising from his seat and clasping forearms with the Shipmaster. "But, for the record, I believe your senses are functioning perfectly..." the Councilor took notice of Surra, who was standing next her husband. "Fate has a sense of humor,

it seemsâ€¦| I have surprised you, but you have surprised me in turn."

"So my husband _was_ telling the truth," Surra grinned, pushing aside the Councilor's offered hand and pulling him instead into a tight embraceâ€¦not as tight as the one she had shared with her husbandâ€¦but it came pretty close. Uros, after all, had stood by her husband through most of the dark times in his life. "When he informed me of your ascension to the High Council, three cycles ago, I confess I could scarcely believe it. Seeing it in the fleshâ€¦ Well, all there is to be said is that you are living proof that the Council can still make wise choices."

"_Wiser_ choices, ever since I have joined their ranks," Uros chuckled as he pushed his chair back under the table. "Now, just to be clear, I am not here in my official capacity. In fact, only two or three other people know that I am currently visiting this base. If you could refrain from mentioning my presence to anyone outside this room, I would be grateful."

Niro arched a brow callus at that. "Why the low profile, old friend?"

"No offense to the present company, but such matters are best discussed in private."

Niro opened his mouth to reply, but no words came. He ended up glancing over to Surra, who gave him a single nod. "Go play, boys," she gestured for them to go ahead. "I'll settle with Uilar for company."

"An honor, madam," Uilar chuckled. "Perhaps a game of strategos?"

While Niro's wife sat down at the table and started reacquainting herself with her husband's second-master, the Shipmaster headed down the hall into his personal quarters, gesturing for Uros to follow. Upon closing the door, their privacy was complete. "Private enough for you?" Niro asked, his brow still raised.

"It will do," Uros nodded, taking a seat in the chair behind Niro's desk. "Gratitude, for seeing me on such short notice."

"Think nothing of it," Niro waved off his old friend's thanks, leaning against the doorframe. "Now tell me why you are acting so strangely."

"Where should I begin?" Uros grunted. "Something is off, in the higher echelons of the hierarchy. Three cycles ago, you are aware that a new Minister of Tranquility was appointed to the High Council, after the death of his predecessor?"

"Yes, I remember hearing about that during one of our leaves at the _Unyielding Hierophant,_ " Niro nodded, the memories slowly coming back to him. "What of it?"

"Well, the unusual thing about it was that his death was not officially announced," Uros continued. "The official story was that the former Minister had been visiting the Second Fleet of Righteous Vigilance, and the ship he was on had been destroyed in a Human

attack. So I gained access to several files from the Archivesâ€”one of them was a compilation of all the personal logs of all the officers of this fleetâ€”and not one mention was made of a visit by the Minister of Tranquility. Tell me, old friendâ€”if the Minister of Tranquility was to suddenly visit your fleetâ€”do you think it would be possible for him to evade any form of mention in your personal logs? Or the logs of your Fleetmaster? Or those of any of the other shipmasters, their second-masters, and their subordinate officers?"

Niro already knew the answer. "So what you are sayingâ€”is that the former Minister never visited that Fleet? That the Lesser Prophets were lying?"

"Yes, well they were not the only files I looked at," Uros admitted. "There were two more files that led me here today. One of them was a personal log entry from three cycles ago, made by you. And the other was a personal identity record of the former Minister himself, where I made a most interesting discoveryâ€”As you know, these high-ranking San 'Shyuum have three namesâ€”the name they take with their title as Prophet, their birth names, and their common names. And guess what the common name of the former Minister was?"

"You had better tell me quick, before all of this suspense stops my hearts."

"Fading Dusk."

That got Niro's full, undivided attention. Immediately, his thoughts turned to the Deacon of his ship. "Surely you do not meanâ€”"

"â€”your Deacon?" Uros finished his friend's question for him. "I'm afraid I do, Niro. And, for some reason that I do not know, the Prophets do not want me to be investigating him. When I first discovered the former Minister's common name, I spent time openly searching the Archives for a 'Fading Dusk', unaware that most of his records had been already purgedâ€”and the Prophets quickly became aware of this. I was summoned to the Ministry of Penance, where the Minister basically told me to cease and desist."

"They threatened you?"

"Well, I wouldn't say threatenâ€”Prophets don't threaten," Uros chuckled. "It was more of a friendly suggestion that I do something else with my free time. In any case, all of my subsequent investigations were conducted in secrecy. This is why I need you to remain silent on the matter of my presence hereâ€”if the Prophets were to find out that I made contact with Fading Duskâ€”Well, best we make sure they do not find out."

"Agreedâ€”" Niro murmured, rising to his feet. "Linger here for a few minutes while I fetch the Deacon."

The Shipmaster of the Sacrosanct ducked out of his personal quarters and left the barracks, ignoring his wife's questioning glances as he passed her and Uilar by. Although no one had told him the whereabouts of Fading Dusk, Niro had a fair idea of where the abrasive San 'Shyuum would be at this time of the evening.

Niro found Fading Dusk in the Russet Smoke, the most popular of the base's 'recreational establishments' for enlisted personnel. It was frequented heavily by common warriors of the combat legions and warrior crÃ"ches, but every so often an officer would join his troops in a celebratory round of whatever the barkeep happened to have in stock.

Shipmasters, however, were a very rare occurrence in the Russet Smoke, and every head turned to see just who exactly Niro was as he stepped inside. There must have been members of the Q'Rumno Creche frequenting the pub tonight, for there were several exclamations of, "_Shipmaster!_" that rose up from the crowd. Niro suspected that those who had acknowledged him were probably intoxicated to some degree, but he ignored that small little detailâ€"it was shore leave, and the warriors deserved a little fun. For some of them, it would be the last 'fun' they'd ever have.

Perhaps this was even the last time Niro would ever set foot on beloved Sanghelios. Perhaps-

Niro shook his head, pushing those dark thoughts from his mind. The pub had returned to normal by the time he made his way over to Fading Dusk, the patrons having seen that Niro was not there to cause trouble.

Fading Dusk was in the middle of a group of veterans from the T'rell Legion, tipping the contents of a rather tall glass down his throat while the warriors counted for him. Finally, the San 'Shyuum slammed his glass back down onto the table and parted his lips in a wide grin, revealing a red sunpiece from a strategos set, clamped between his teeth. The Deacon set the sunpiece down and steadied himself on the table, taking several deep breaths.

"_Deacon,_" Niro cleared his throat. "I have need of your presence in the officers' barracks."

Fading Dusk looked up, seeing his Shipmaster for the first time, giving an irritated grunt. "Can this wait? I am in the middle of something, here."

Niro's expression remained static. "No. It cannot."

Fading Dusk extricated himself from the group of warriors and accompanied Niro outside, all the while muttering under his breath. "Have you any idea how long it took me to get those idiots to play their little drinking games with me?" the San 'Shyuum asked accusingly. "The answer is _a long time_. Took forever for them to stop groveling in my presence. It was all _Your Holiness_ this, and _Your Holiness_ thatâ€"it's bloody ridiculous! How do you Sangheili manage to have any fun when you're all so solemn all the damn time?"

"A Deacon should not be drinking with those whom he leads in spiritual guidance," Niro grunted, leading the way across the giant compound back towards his barracks.

"Well, good thing I'm not a real Deacon," Fading Dusk retorted. "What do you need a 'Deacon' for so badly, anyway? I never took you for the religious type."

"I am not, and I do not need a Deacon," Niro clarified. "I need you. Or rather, a friend of mine needs you, for reasons I have yet to discern. He will not be happy if you are too intoxicated to provide him with meaningful answers."

"Ehâ€¦ I've been worse. I can give your friend what he needs," the San 'Shyuum sighed, pausing momentarily to give a small burp. "Better be some kind of bigshot, dragging me out of my me-time."

"He is a member of the High Council."

"Ahh," Fading Dusk chuckled. "A bigshot, indeedâ€¦ Very well, I shall endeavor to act as sober as possible for the next hour."

"Gratitude," Niro sighed.

The Shipmaster and the Deacon returned to the barracks without much more conversation. Fading Dusk offered greetings to Uilar, his second-master, and to Surra, although he did not know she was Niro's wife. Niro led him down the hall and into his personal quarters, shutting the door behind him.

Uros had been sitting behind Niro's small desk, examining something on his datapad. Upon his old friend's arrival, Uros rose to his feet. "That went faster than I expected," he remarked.

"Our mutual acquaintance was more than happy to help," Niro gave a light grin, though Uros could plainly see that it was not a genuine smile.

The Councilor turned his attention to the middle-aged San 'Shyuum who had entered the room with Niro. For starters, it surprised Uros to see a San 'Shyuum walking around on his own two legs; the Prophets were not renowned for their physical fitness, and the vast majority of them would be found moving around in their fancy anti-gravity chairsâ€"which was something the Sangheili looked down upon, though they kept this opinion to themselves.

"You are a difficult man to find," Uros declared. "It took me three cycles and more credits than I care to count."

Fading Dusk arched an eyebrow at that. "Pardon meâ€"much as I would love to continue this pleasant conversationâ€¦ I find myself hindered somewhat by the fact that I have no bloody idea who you are."

"Have some respect, Deacon," Niro growled. "You are speaking to a Councilor."

"And he is speaking to the former Minister of Tranquility," the San 'Shyuum shot back at the Shipmaster before turning his attention back to Uros. "A member of the High Council, are you? I knew every single member of the High Council, yet you are unknown to me."

"My name is Uros 'Oenairemee, of Rhudos Keep," Uros introduced himself. "Yourâ€¦departure from the High Council resulted in a vacant seat, which I was chosen to fill. This is why we never met in the Holy City."

The name struck a chord in Fading Dusk's memory, and he turned his

attention back over to Niro. "This is your friend Uros? The one you have told me about from your days in the Navy?"

Niro gave a single nod. "The same."

"Well, why did you not say so before?" Fading Dusk clasped forearms with Uros, giving him a firm shake.

"Have you been drinking, Deacon?" Uros asked, smelling alcohol on Fading Dusk's breath.

"Quite a bit, yes," the San 'Shyuum replied without even blinking.

Uros drew his mandibles back in a grin. "I like this one," the Councilor chuckled.

"I will take my leave," Niro backed out of his quarters, giving Uros some privacy. "Seek me out when your business here is concluded."

When the door closed, Fading Dusk and Uros were left alone in the room.

"Well, I believe you were the one looking for me, soâ€¦" Fading Dusk cleared his throat. "Care to tell me what was so important that you had to drag me across the base?"

Uros gestured for the San 'Shyuum to take a seat in the other chair. "Apologies for the abruptness of this meeting, but my presence here is known only to a select few people, and I would prefer that knowledge to not spread beyond its current boundaries. Absolute discretion is a friend to us both."

"Yes, yes, we don't want either of our heads to end up on the Minister of Penance's desk; you can dispense with the time-wasting drivel you no doubt planned on sharing with me before getting to the point," Fading Dusk sighed. "Now tell me; why are you here?"

Uros found that he was constantly reassessing the Deacon. Fading Dusk had a personality unlike any other San 'Shyuum Uros had ever encounteredâ€¦and as a member of the High Council, he'd encountered more than his fair share of the ruling species of the Covenant. Gods forbid, Fading Dusk reminded Uros more of a Sangheili than anything elseâ€¦

"A straight-talking San 'Shyuumâ€¦now I've seen everythingâ€¦" Uros muttered under his breath before clearing his throat and, as requested, getting to the point. "Very well, no more delays. Three cycles ago, I was contacted by a man, a man of my own race, who refused to identify himself, or even show his faceâ€¦a wise show of discretion, I suppose. Looking back on it now, I am under the impression that this man is someone who is believed to be dead by the High Council, and he even said that if he were known to be alive, all of his work would be undone."

"So the old bastard is still aliveâ€¦" Fading Dusk murmured.

"I'm sorry?"

"This Sangheili who contacted youâ€”did he do so by slipping a message into your personal effects? And did he always meet you at the Ied Unnel Theatre, in the Ceulaimon District?"

"Wellâ€¦ I've only been contacted by him once, but that is indeed how it happened," Uros confirmed.

"I do not know the man's name," Fading Dusk continued. "All I know is that this man was an officer in the crew of the _Enlightened Soul_. Ring any bells?"

"The _Enlightened Soul_â€¦" Uros's brow furrowed in a light frown. He _did_ know the name, but he could not quite place his finger on it. Was it a colony? A ship, perhaps? And that was when the Councilor remembered. "That was Imperial Admiral 'Kharreeve's ship, was it not?"

"The very same."

Uros's frown deepened. "That ship was destroyed at theâ€¦where was it, again?"

"The Humans called it the Epsilon Indi System," Fading Dusk clarified. "We have no names for the Human star systems. The High Council receives a transmission from the Humans, requesting peace talks. Imperial Admiral 'Kharreeve personally takes command of a battlegroup and departs for the Epsilon Indi System, where the Humans ambush and destroy his force in an attempt to cripple our leadership, thereby sparking further conflict, etcetera, etceteraâ€”we all know the story of the late Imperial Admiral's demise."

"How could this man be an officer of 'Kharreeve's crew, then, when the _Enlightened Soul_ was lost with all hands, along with every other vessel that accompanied her?"

"That, my dear Councilor, is something you will have to ask the man yourself," Fading Dusk replied. "He never shared this knowledge with me, but perhaps he might share it with a fellow Sangheili."

"Anyway, this man contacts me, and he tells me to investigate the previous Minister of Tranquilityâ€”_you_â€”who was thought to be dead. He told me things were not as they seemed," Uros paused to clear his throat once again. He reached into his inner pocket and drew out a flask, taking a quick swig before offering it to Fading Dusk.

Fading Dusk frowned. "Your friend the Shipmaster mentioned that you no longer drink alcohol."

"It is water."

"_Ah,_" Fading Dusk accepted the flask, taking a long drink. "Best I drink some water now, anywayâ€”I am predicting a rather harsh hangover, tomorrow morning."

When Fading Dusk was finished, Uros continued. "Everyone knew the official story of your deathâ€”you were visiting the Second Fleet of Righteous Vigilance, and were lost when the Fleet was claimed by the Humans. However, our man in the shadows presented me with evidence from the logs and reports of that very Fleet that you had never

visited them to begin with. He then also provided me with your records, where I found your common nameâ€|and it was Shipmaster 'Ovarumee's sole mention of your common name in his personal logs that led me here to youâ€"all other records of you were purged from the Archives."

"And it only took you three cycles to find me, in all those logs?" Fading Dusk sounded impressed. "You had dear old Sentinel on your payroll, I warrant."

"I have no idea what you are talking about," Uros replied with a faint grin. "In any case, I arranged for your current shore leave so I could contact you here, on Sanghelios, where the eyes of the High Council cannot follow me. And that is why I am here. As for why _you_ are hereâ€| Our man in the shadows was very keen on pointing me in your direction. What happened to you? Why did you leave the High Council, and why did they see the need to fake your death?"

Fading Dusk was silent for a short while, staring at the Councilor, making his own deductions about his visitor. Finally, when he spoke, he said, "This is a dangerous game you are playing, Councilor 'Oenairemee, a dangerous game indeed. There is much that happens within the ranks of the Lesser Prophets that is unknown to the Sangheili Councilors, and this is but one example. Had I not 'left' the High Council, I believe I would have ended up in a back alley in the Outer Ring with an opened throat."

Uros opened his mouth to speak, but Fading Dusk held up his hand, silencing the Councilor.

"I was close with many of the Councilors, but none of the Prophets," Fading Dusk continued to explain. "I personally prefer the company of your kindâ€|there is something so refreshing about a people who like to speak their minds, as opposed to my own kind, where every single thing we say is about as straight as an Unggoy's aim. Unfortunately, this left me isolated in the High Council, though I did not see this until it was too lateâ€"I never said I was a good politician. There were discrepancies that I was investigating within High Charityâ€| I was not very subtle about it, and I was called before the Ministry of Penance and ordered to stop."

"The same happened to me," Uros grunted. "They suggested that you shouldâ€|how shall I sayâ€|put your time to better use?"

"Indeed," Fading Dusk nodded. "They did not call me out on what I was doing and tell me to stopâ€"such directness is not the way of the Prophets. But that was still the underlying message: _continue doing what you are doing, and bad things will happen to you_. Fool that I was, I did not listen, and I continued my investigations."

"What were these discrepancies?"

"The main issues I found were the irregularities in the records of many of our key arms factories. Facilities on Ossos, on Uen Prime, Nyvos, and many other colony worlds, and even the Godswrathâ€"the primary armory of High Charity, in the Outer Ringâ€"had all increased production over the past decade, or so. They were making more weapons, more equipment than normalâ€|but while their rate of production increased, shipments of war materi  l to the military did _not_."

"Which means these facilities had a phantom surplusâ€¦ And if this has been happening for over a decade, it is clearly no accident," Uros finished for the Deacon, following the San 'Shyuum's train of thought. "And if the military did not get this surplusâ€¦where did all that extra equipment go?"

This time, it was Fading Dusk's turn to grin. He gave an approving nod, saying, "You are a very intelligent man, for a soldier."

"I will assume that was your form of a compliment."

"You may assume what you wish," Fading Dusk shrugged. "But yes, you more or less summed it up. I only got a brief glimpse at these records before the Ministry of Penance noticed what I was doing and purged them from the Archives. I hired Sentinel to retrieve them, however, and I made my discoveries later on. Before I could make contact with our man in the shadows, however, I was quietly arrested by the Honor Guard and brought before the Prophet of Truth himselfâ€¦ I was stripped of my position and status, and given a choiceâ€¦either leave the High Council and retire to a distant colony world, or stay. I was not stupid; I knew that if I chose to stay, I would not survive to see the next week. Instead of taking either of those options, I requested to be demoted to the rank of Deacon and stationed on a distant Fleet. I was immediately removed from High Charity, a story fabricated to explain my absence and, subsequently, my death. And so, here I sit."

"If what you were doing was so sensitive, why did the Prophets spare your life?"

"I do not know," Fading Dusk shrugged. "I do not believe it was as necessary to kill me as you might think. These discoveries seemed harmless to meâ€¦what intrigued me more was why they would make such a big deal over a few numerical errors. The discrepancies in of themselves were harmless discoveries, but I am certain that they could have led me to something very, very sensitive, had I the time to investigate them further."

"I suppose that is where I come inâ€¦" Uros said quietly. "With you gone, our man in the shadows had to find a new friend in the High Council."

"And you are proving to be much better at it than I ever was," Fading Dusk chuckled. "How positively San 'Shyuum of you."

Though Uros did not show it, that last quip from the Deacon actually bothered him slightly. Shaking his head once, the Councilor banished his discomfort and continued to speak with Fading Dusk, getting the details of why the former Minister of Tranquility had been ousted from High Charity. They spoke for a long while, at least for two hours.

In the end, Uros thanked Fading Dusk for his time, allowed the aging San 'Shyuum to leave. The Councilor sat alone for several minutes, having only his thoughts for company. He had learned a lot today, but none of it made very much sense. The puzzle presented to him by the man in the shadows was still a long way from being solved.

Finally, the Councilor rose to his feet and left the room, heading

back out into the lobby. Niro, Surra, and Uilar were all still sitting at their table, sharing a large bottle of what Uros recognized as moonwhiskey. Violet Sunfruit moonwhiskeyâ€”one of his favorite brands, imported directly from the Taham Archipelago. Or rather, what had _used_ to be one of his favorite brands.

Niro excused himself from the table and stood up, stepping over to meet his oldest friend. "You were in there for quite a while," the Shipmaster remarked. "Did you find out what you needed?"

Uros gave a long, quiet sigh, massaging one of his temples. "When _I_ find the answer to that question, I'll let you know."

15. II Chapter 15: Desperation and Insanity

****_Author's Note_****

Well, I suppose I owe a bit of an apology to my Halo readers for the giant hiatus I've been taking with this story. The honest truth of it was that I had severe writer's block for Reclamation, and I was no longer quite sure of the direction I wanted to take it in. Plus, keep in mind the fact that I had already been writing in the Haloverse almost nonstop for multiple years before starting Reclamation... I was a little burned out!

For now, I need to take some time to really plan out the core plotline of this story, figure out where I want the characters to end up. A lot's changed since the last chapter I updated - the Haloverse has expanded greatly with the Forerunner Trilogy, the Kilo-Five Trilogy, as well as the release of Halo 4. All of this presents me with a lot of opportunities for the future if I were to, hypothetically speaking, continue writing into that time period...and now I have to take all this new material into account when writing Reclamation. So I will continue to try and update this story when I can, but it will be some time until I can focus all my attention on it once more.

But enough on that. As I said, I owe you all an apology...so I figured I would try and make up for lost time by writing a super-long chapter; probably the longest I've ever written to date, actually! Enjoy!

TheAmateur

* * *

><p>Chapter Fifteen: Desperation and Insanity<p>

****9****th**** Age of Reclamation, 17****th**** Cycle**

>Reverence-Class Battlecruiser ****Sacrosanct****, in transit through the Nether**

****Aten****_

One's concept of time becomes mildly distorted and warped, after living on a starship for long stretches of service, and it gets difficult sometimes to continue to segment my life into days, weeks, or even cycles. Such measurements of time are applied to life on a

planet, with natural days and nightsâ€”they do not easily make the transition to life in outer space. I've grown accustomed to measuring my life in battles, like the vast majority of my brothers in the military.

But still, if I had to reflect upon the previous 'day' of my life, I would have to admit that it had been going rather well. That is, until I made my way to the dining hall for my evening meal.

I had been sparring all afternoon with the surviving members of the group of warriors I'd joined the Q'Rumno Creche with. There had been nearly forty of us, back in the beginning, split into the five Elements of the crÃ"che. Now there were less than twenty. The Third Elementâ€”the unit of which my lance was a partâ€”had been hit the hardest, where my generation was concerned. Oros, Y'mir, Heran, and myself were the only members of our recruit group in the Third Element who had survived long enough to make it into the ranks of the astiros. Most of us had died during our days as members of the oronos tierâ€”the officers always threw the more inexperienced, newer troops into the thickest fighting. The philosophy was to root out the weaklings in the oronos so that only the strong would survive to join the combat legions.

I am not sure I agreed with this philosophy. I certainly did not feel like a 'strong one'. I think that throwing the oronos into the meatgrinder rooted out the _lucky_ ones, not necessarily the strong ones. I have seen plenty of physically and mentally 'strong' men die in their first battle. It takes Fortune's benevolence to survive a war, not the strength of your muscles or the trueness of your aim.

But none of that mattered. It was not my place to agree or disagree with this philosophy. Sangheili have been fighting wars for countless generationsâ€”the opinions of a lowly warrior would not change millennia of tradition.

I grunted with exertion as I blocked Oros's latest blow. We were using wooden drill swords, and Oros was giving me my fair share of bruises. I suppose I was giving him a substantial bruising, as well, but I certainly had the greater number of bruises between the two of us. I had never been overly accomplished at hand-to-hand combat, compared to many of my peers. I was much better with rifles. For this reason, I was eternally grateful that I had not been born in the Feudal Age. There had not been any energy rifles then.

Then again, had I been born in the Feudal Age, I probably would have died from one disease or another before I even had the chance to take up a sword for my Kaidon.

I tried to twist my way through Oros's guard, but the yellow-eyed Urassan was too quick for me. He deflected my counterattack off to the side and brought his stave back up around, cracking me up the side of my head. I staggered back several paces, blinking the stars out of my eyes.

"Is your skull injured?" Oros asked me in a mildly concerned tone, swinging his stave around in a lazy circle.

"Not as much as yours is about to be," I growled, shaking my head several times and regaining my balance. When I was a child, a blow

like that would have given me headaches for days. Now, I barely felt them.

Oros grinned, bringing his stave back up into the ready position. "Dance with me, then."

"Don't dance with him, Aten," Y'mir advised me, somehow able to speak to me while fending off a flurry of attacks from Rhuvan 'Okkaitonee, the younger astir who was serving as his opponent. "Just bash his face in!"

"Thank you for the advice, did your Kaidon teach you that?" I rolled my eyes as Oros and I clashed once more, both of us trying to overcome the other's guard. When it became clear that neither of us were going to budge, we disengaged and started circling each other. We both made several feint moves, trying to make each other slip up, but neither of us fell for the mutual bait.

In the end, Oros ended up locking staves with me and sending me sprawling with a well-aimed kick to the stomach. I slid back across the floor about a meter or so. I breathed deeply several times, trying to get my breath back. That kick had knocked the wind out of me.

"Do not think less of yourself," Oros chuckled, helping me back to my feet. "Not everyone is a Swordsman."

"A pity we cannot spar with energy rifles," I lamented. "That is a sparring bout you would lose, brother."

Oros's grin only widened slightly. "Well, I suppose all we can do is speculate."

As we spoke, Y'mir managed to get past Rhuvan's guard, knocking aside his opponent's stave and pressing his own practice weapon to the other warrior's neck. Rhuvan bowed out, retrieving his drill sword.

"Alright, the two of you should have at it, then," I suggested, pointing at both Oros and Y'mir. "Rhuvan and I were clearly just the warmup matches for you two Swordsman champions. Come now, show the rest of us something breathtaking!"

Everyone else on the sparring floor laughed and grumbled some form of agreement and approval. When it came to sword combat, Oros was one of the best in the crÃ"che. But Y'mir was also a very unpredictable fighter, and if anyone was capable of getting the better of Oros, it was him.

"It seems we are fated to cross blades, brother," Y'mir pulled his mandibles back in an anticipatory grin, raising his stave to the ready stance. "I wonder how we have gone so long without finally facing each other?"

"It is a mystery," Oros sighed, working his arms and neck around in a quick series of stretches before taking up his stave once again. "Let us hurry this up, shall we? I find myself in the mood for dinner."

The sparring died down as Y'mir and Oros began to circle each other.

A lot of people had wanted to see these two fight each other for a long timeâ€”there had even been a betting pool going around on which one would win if they were ever to face each other. Now it seemed everyone was going to get the chance to find out.

Then, as if the Gods themselves did not wish for this duel to happen, there was a loud chime that filled every deck and room in the _Sacrosanct_. It was the ship-wide comm. Silence fell over the sparring chamberâ€”whenever the ship-wide comm was used, battle usually followed. Sure enough, the familiar voice of Shipmaster 'Ovarumee issued from the comm, ordering all combat units to their briefing areas.

I suppose Y'mir and Oros's showdown would have to wait. I glanced at the others soberly as they gathered their gear and hurried out of the sparring chamber. They had been hoping to see my two friends duel each other, and now they would have to wait. But I also knew it was likely that three or five of them would no longer be alive when it happened. Such was the way of things.

I also knew it was likely that _I_ could be the one to take the Journey, this time. I never stopped remembering that fact.

"I think old Niro has it all planned out," Oros growled as he stowed his wooden stave back into the weapons box, joining Y'mir and me as we ducked out of the sparring chamber and back into the corridor. "He never once calls us to arms _after_ I have had my dinner; always _before_â€”|"

"Yes, brother, the Humans' cleansing is being planned specifically to spite your digestive cycles." Y'mir gave an agreeing nod, not trying very hard to hide his amusement.

We made our way into the nearest lift, piling in with several more warriors from various other ground units. When the ground forces began to mobilize, the naval personnel tended to stay out of our way, so we did not see any crewmembers along the way. The lift dropped me and my brothers off on a lower deck, and those of us belonging to the Q'Rumno Creche filed out back into the corridors.

Qel 'Inanraree, Field Master of the Q'Rumno, was waiting for us in our briefing chamber. Like most rooms in vessels of the Covenant Navy, our briefing chamber was large and very spacious. Large enough to hold our entire warrior crÃ”che, which numbered over two thousand strong. We sat divided into our four respective elements, with our Field Officers and senior astiros sitting up close to the center of the room, while the rest of us sat in the higher tiers.

I nearly had to strain my neck to see the highest tier, furthest away from the center of the room. I knew that sitting up there were the dead men, the newly-recruited Proselytes who had yet to prove themselves in battle. We called them dead men because many of them would not survive their first engagement. It was not until a warrior joined the astiros that he began to be considered a person once again.

"Brothers, welcome!" Field Master 'Inanraree held up a hand, and the chamber quickly fell into a hushed silence. A holographic representation of a planet shimmered into appearance, hovering over the holopad in the very centre of the room. "This world you see

before you contains relics left behind by the Gods, which have been detected by the ship's Luminary. These relics belong to the Prophets. Fortunately for us, brothers, this world _also_ happens to have a Human infestation!"

A rumble of laughter rose up from the tiers. All planets we visited had a Human infestation. And if this world had Forerunner relics, that meant we would not simply glass the place and be done with it. No, the infantry would be sent in to clear out the Humans from the population centers until adequate intel of the planet could be gleaned from the Human databases.

Then all nonessential sectors of the planet would be cleansed. It was all very standard, really.

"Our intelligence has already gleaned the basic information of the world below," the Field Master continued. "Four continents—one with polar, arctic tundra. No population. A second, equatorial. Tropical climate, jungles, currently in the middle of monsoon season. Two major population centers, population of thirty million. These continents are of no interest to us and will be subjected to summary cleansing. Our attention shall be drawn to the final landmass. It is a landmass comprising of two continents—one to the north, the other to the south; both connected to each other by a narrow isthmus. The northern continent also possesses a polar climate and no significant population centers; as such, it will also be subject to summary cleansing. Our interests lie solely in the southern continent—the smallest on this world. Temperate climate, savanna-like terrain, three major population centers—collective population of sixty million. Our ground forces will be dropped in at various strategic locations throughout this landmass."

As the Field Master outlined the general plan of attack, the holograph of the Human world zoomed in to show the largest of the three cities on the smallest continent. "The Humans call this city—Rustenpoort—" 'Inanraree seemed to struggle with the pronunciation of the foreign name. Understandable—translation from the Human languages to our own was difficult enough, but their names seldom had direct translations in of themselves, forcing us to try and pronounce words not meant for creatures with proper mandibles.

'Inanraree forged ahead, unfazed at his botched pronunciation attempt. "Well, it really matters not what the name of this city is—within the week, everyone who calls it that name will have gone wherever Humans go after death."

That provoked another round of chuckles.

"This city rests on a natural topographical elevation—a giant hill, if you will. The Humans were able to fill it with anti-aircraft batteries, so aerial insertion is out of the question."

That surprised me, somewhat. The Human city must have some really tough anti-air defenses to make the Fleetmaster hesitate. Normally the higher-ups were not opposed to sending massive waves of Phantom and Spirit dropships through Human anti-aircraft defenses. Unfortunately for us, warrior crabs were usually the first units to go through the meatgrinder.

"Because of this, we will be taking this city from the ground," 'Inanraree concluded. "There is a ring of fortifications surrounding the target city which we shall have to breach. Artillery, anti-armor emplacements, and enough Humans to give our newer recruits ample target practice. We will be entering battle with support from the Urapos Legion on our right flank. Laurels shall be granted to the first unit to break the Human lines. This is our next mission, brothers. Go and prepare yourselvesâ€"we drop in thirty. May honor light your paths!"

"_And yours,_" over two-thousand voices murmured in response. As one, we all stood up and started the somewhat lengthy process of exiting the briefing chamber. There were a lot of us in here, and only a limited number of exits. Might even be a bit of a fire hazard, when I thought about it. But the odds of a fire happening during a briefing session were negligible at best.

Members of the astiros sat closer to the center of the chamber, so I was able to stand up and exit through one of the lower entrances, emerging onto Deck Five. I sought out the nearest lift with Y'mir, Oros, Rhuvan, and several others from my unit. We were to report to Armory 16-C, which was where we stored our weapons and armor. The lift dropped us off at Deck Sixteen, and we emerged into a frenzy of activity.

As a Reverence-class cruiser, the _Sacrosanct_ was larger and more heavily armored than a normal CCS-class battlecruiser. As such, it would carry members of the warrior crÃ"ches assigned to the fleet, rather than the combat legions, which were carried aboard the full-blown carrier-class vessels. We passed by warriors from our own crÃ"che, as well as the Issio CrÃ"che, which had been stationed onboard the _Sacrosanct_ ever since the destruction of the _Cold Fire_, one of the other Reverence-class vessels in the fleet. Luckily for the Issio, they had been fighting on the ground at the time of their home ship's destruction.

We also passed by groups of our brothers who were members of the crew of the _Sacrosanct_, be it the marine security force, or even one of the officers. There were also Unggoy and Huragok crewmen, but they tended to keep to the service corridors, especially at a time like now, when the halls were filled with Sangheili answering the call to battle.

Iunus 'Amphyrysee was waiting for us in the armory. He was the Quartermaster of the Q'Rumno, responsible for the upkeep of our weapons and equipment, as well as the treatment of light wounds sustained in the field of battle. "_Astiros,_" welcome once again." The aging warrior greeted us a nod.

"Honor light your path, Quartermaster." Y'mir returned the nod. "Any new surprises for us?"

"Afraid not." 'Amphyrysee shook his head, drumming his fingers nonchalantly against the bulkhead. "Took all my free time to repair the sheer amount of damage you children incurred on my equipment. You do realize that your combat harnesses are not made out of Forerunner alloys? You think they can take constant punishment day after day and not begin to chafe? Have any of you ever considered _ducking_ every once in a while?"

"You would have us dishonor ourselves in battle as the Humans do?" Oros remarked, shrugging on the chestplate of his combat harness. "Cowering in fear from enemy fire?"

"It is easy to pretend to be honorable when you are protected by cushy energy shields," the Quartermaster grumbled. "Also makes my job much more difficultâ€¦"

As I slipped into my own combat harness, my upper left thumb began to itch. Or rather, the stump that had once been my upper left thumb began to itch. Ever since it had been blown off by a burst from a Human heavy machinegun, four cycles ago, I had suffered from phantom pain. Sometimes it would be a dull ache, other times it would be an irritating itch. It always came on worse before a battle, though.

"Have you at least repaired my wrist daggers?" Oros asked.

"Fully functional, just like whatever part of your brain that controls your impatience."

That scored a long round of quiet laughter from Y'mir.

"My _self-preservation,_ if you ask me," Oros retorted. "I nearly took the Journey on the last Human world because my wrist daggers malfunctioned right when a Human attacked me with one of their close combat weapons."

The others continued to gripe with one another as more of our brethren filed into the armory, recovering their battle armor and equipment for the coming campaign. I was silent as I donned my blue armor. I ran a brief systems check, making sure my heads-up display was functioning properly, as well as the energy dagger mounted on my left wrist.

Some of our brothers were already fully geared up, already jogging out of the armory. I picked up the pace, discarding my leather sandals and pulling on the boots that completed my combat harness. After a few moments, all the various pieces of the harness synced up with one another, and the armor was fully activated, now functioning as a single unit.

I watched Y'mir attach his energy sword to the magnetic clamp on his waist, eyeing the weapon with envy. Because I'd lost my thumb, I was rendered unable to wield an energy sword, the signature weapon of my people. It was a bit of a notch in my self-esteem that had taken me a while to accept, but I could not change the past. My thumb would not magically reappear no matter how much I wished it toâ€"best to put it out of my mind.

I then pulled my weapons from the locker I used. Not long after I survived my seventh battle and rose to the astiros, my Field Officer had allowed me to swap my standard energy rifle for a Type-51 Carbine. I was no sniper, but my midrange accuracy had always been excellent, thanks to the almost brutal training my Guardian had subjected me to ever since I was a youngling.

I placed my carbine on the magnetic weapons strip across my back, then attached my energy pistol to the holster on my right thigh which also doubled as a charging unit when the pistol ran dry. Now that I

was armed, I was ready to go. I linked back up with Oros and Y'mir outside the armory, and the three of us proceeded together to the nearest lift. We piled inside with about a dozen members from one of the elements of the Issio CrÃ"che. The ride down to the lower decks was cramped and stuffy. A few people cleared their throats and someone sneezed, but I couldn't see who.

When we reached Deck Three, all of us were glad to pile out. From there, it was straight into the hangar bay, which was by far the largest chamber in the cruiser. It spanned three decks and several sections, large enough to hold an entire air wing of banshee fighters, both standard and exo-atmospheric models, as well as enough phantom dropships to transport both the Q'Rumno and Issio CrÃ"ches to the surface of the planet we were bound for.

Unlike combat legions, warrior crÃ"ches were not afforded the luxury of having their own vehicles. As such, there were no wraith tanks, no assault vehicles of any kind in the hangar bay. I would imagine that freed up considerable space for our transports.

Field Officers were on the flight deck, barking out orders, herding all of their warriors into their appropriate ships. I was the one to spot Field Officer 'Neiasree, the veteran officer who'd commanded the Q'Rumno's Third Element since long before I'd been recruited into the crÃ"che.

"'Tahamee, 'Oenairemee, 'Kusovee!" Field Officer 'Neiasree had evidently spotted us as well, judging from his yelling our respective surnames. "Seven minutes until drop; cutting it a little close, are we? Report to the _Green Helioskrill_ for deployment. Go with the Gods."

"See you in the fire, Officer." Y'mir clasped a fist to his hearts in salute as we passed 'Neiasree by.

"And you as well." 'Neiasree returned the salute. "Take care it does not consume you prematurely."

The three of us made our way towards the hangar bay doors, where the _Green Helioskrill_ awaited us. We met up with a small group of our brother astiros at the _Green Helioskrill_, our assigned dropship. Together, the twenty-odd of us formed a lance within the veteran company, which comprised of all the astiros in the Third Element.

Our lance was led by Nuren 'Yuzafee, whoâ€"at over thirty cycles of ageâ€"was one of the oldest members of the Q'Rumno, surpassed in age only by the Quartermaster and a couple of the officers, including the Field Master. He was a warrior who had opted to remain part of a purely-Sangheili warrior crÃ"che, rather than transferring to an integrated combat legion at the end of his initial service. It was not an uncommon occurrence for warriors to do this; some considered fighting alongside the Unggoy and Kig-yar filth to be beneath them.

I personally had no love for the other species of our Covenant, but it was not my place to pass judgmentâ€"that right belonged to the Prophets, and the Gods whom they served. If it was their will that we all fought alongside one another, then it was my duty to obey.

Nuren was in the middle of getting everyone loaded up into our dropship. We were the last of our lance to arrive. When he spotted us, Nuren gave a quiet grunt, gesturing for us to board the phantom. "Cutting it a bit close today, are we?" he quipped, unaware that he was echoing the Field Officer's words.

"Come, Nuren, you know as well as us that when there's cleansing of Humans to be had, we would not miss it for the world!" Y'mir chuckled, stepping into the anti-grav beam that was shining down from the underside entry hatch of the _Green Helioskrill's_ troop bay. Oros and I were hot on his heels.

I felt a slight twinge of nausea as I stepped into the indigo light that made me feel weightless, carrying me up through the circular hatchway and into the troop bay. The interior of the phantom was dimly lit, illuminated by powered panels built into the bulkheads that emitted a soft purple glow. Normally the violet light would have had a soothing effectâ€|but such an effect was hard to appreciate when you were about to be plunged into battle, nor was it necessarily desired.

Older warriors commonly meditated before battle, cleansing themselves of emotion and finding their spiritual center. They entered combat with minds and reflexes as sharp as the teeth of a snow manx, unfettered by anything that might cause them to be distracted. They were deadly, wise, and revered.

But I was none of these things, nor was I adept at meditation. For me, all meditation would accomplish is weariness and sluggishness. Obviously I was not doing it right, but until I learnedâ€| I survived battle through adrenaline-sharpened instinct. Perhaps when I age, as my body begins to slow down, I will learn new ways to fight. But for now, I fight as a youth.

Nuren was the last to enter the _Green Helioskrill_. Upon his entry, the pilot deactivated the grav-beam and sealed the hatch, rendering the phantom spaceworthy. The cockpit was sealed off as well, and the troop bay hummed with energy as the pilot fired up the propulsion thrusters. As the _Green Helioskrill_ passed through the atmosphere-retaining force fields that kept the hangar braced against the vacuum of space when its doors were open, I made my way over to the port-side bulkhead, steadying myself.

We could all feel the transition from the hangar bay of the _Sacrosanct_ to outer spaceâ€|the artificial gravity of the Reverence-class battlecruiser faded, giving my body the jittery feeling of weightlessness. The only thing keeping us from floating all around the troop bay were our boots, which magnetically clamped themselves to the floor. Then there was a brief jerk as the pilot fired up the primary engines.

I peered through one of the portholes, craning my neck to get a glimpse of the world upon which we were about to deliver the Prophets' wrath. It was a beautiful world, despite its Human infestation. Not nearly as beautiful as Mother Sanghelios, obviously, but stillâ€| Almost a shame to have to turn a world like this into a cinder.

And above the worldâ€| I recognized many of the several dozen ships that made up the Fleet of Righteous Fervorâ€|but they were

supplemented by multiple hundred additional warships from three or four other fleets. The fleets had been organized by the Council of Masters into the temporary Combined Fleet of Sacred Purpose, under the overall command of Supreme Commander Vurachos 'Ontomee.

Many of the ships were assuming attack formations as the Human navy began to arrive from the other side of the planet. Other vessels, like the _Sacrosanct_, instead entered into some form of orbit over the Human worldâ€”these ships were the ones bearing ground forces. I remained expressionless as I stared at them. We would probably lose a smaller vessel or two to them, but in the end they would all burn. The Human ground forces were outmatched enough as it was, but their counterparts in spaceâ€” When it came to the naval side of this war, there was no contest.

"Our forces are going to be deployed in a valley!" Nuren informed us as we hurtled through space towards the planet, giving us the last-minute lancemaster's briefing. "We will not be facing the Human fortifications alone, this time, however! As the Field Master said, we will have the support of the Urapos Legion on our right flankâ€”after our own landfall, the Urapos will be inserted from the _Calamity's End!_ We will have the necessary reinforcements; all we must do is keep pressing the vermin! Not one step back!"

As we started to drop into the planet's gravity well, I looked away from the porthole. In moments, there would be nothing to see except the flames of reentry. We could all feel when the dropship entered the atmosphere of the Human worldâ€”the temperature would begin to rise, and the troop bay would start to tremor and shake.

If any of the others had a pre-battle ritual, they carried them out now. I heard several of my brothers murmuring to themselves, offering up prayers to the Gods, no doubt. Prayers for a glorious death, I would imagineâ€”no warrior ever prayed to survive a battle. If we were to survive a battle, it would be the will of the Gods; _not_ our own. Others, like Y'mir, recited war poetry. Others, still, merely kept silent and waited.

As for me, I took my carbine from the weapon strip on the back of my combat harness. I then proceeded to wipe it down with an oily rag, cleaning off the imaginary rust. I knew there wasn't actually any grime on my rifleâ€”I kept it spotlessâ€”but the act of cleaning it calmed whatever nerves I sometimes got before combat. I enjoyed field-stripping it as well, but I would not have time to do that here.

Finally, after what seemed like hours, the cockpit unsealed itself and Nuren stepped through, rejoining us in the troop bay. "Make final preparations!" the lancemaster ordered us. "We are coming up on landfall; if any of you wish to pray to the Gods, now is the time to do it!"

I closed my eyes, tightening my grip on the carbine, doing my best to keep my breathing rate under control. I shut out any distracting thoughts, focusing only on the beating of my hearts and the vibrations that came from the primary engines. I did a silent check of my equipment, making sure everything was in place. My ammunition belt, my energy pistol, my grenadesâ€”

My eyes opened to the sound of a mechanical whir. Sunlight spilled

into the troop bay as the side doors were unsealed and opened. Three Unggoy emerged from the engine room in the back—the green-armored one was the phantom's crew chief, and his two subordinates served as door gunners. Following their crew chief's orders, the two Unggoy gunners lowered their respective plasma cannons from their resting places on the bulkheads, moving them out onto the ledge of the side doors.

Before we knew it, the Green Helioskrill was hovering barely fifteen feet off the ground. Time to go.

Nuren stepped out onto one of the ledges formed by the phantom's bulkhead, standing in one of the side deployment openings. Human weaponsfire immediately began to ricochet and ping off the phantom's armor—several rounds actually struck the lancemaster, but his energy shields were able to absorb the damage. As the Unggoy gunners began to return fire with the phantom's door cannons, the lancemaster gestured for everyone to disembark. "Time to jump, boys! Keep low! Keep mobile! And whoever takes the Journey first, remember to wait for your brothers in the afterlife!"

There was an answering roar that rose from twenty-odd veteran throats, including my own.

Nuren was the first one out the doors. He jumped, spreading his legs and arms, vanishing from view. He was immediately followed by Vrossad, the second-oldest member member of the lance, and Rhytos—the hulking giant from the western moors of Irapan State, who served as one of the heavy weapons specialists.

Y'mir was the first one to jump from the starboard-side opening. Oros, Rhuvan, and Heran 'Avamee brushed past me and leaped off the edge of the phantom dropship after the islander. I took one last deep breath and, not wanting to be the last one off the phantom, sprinted out through the opening after my brothers.

I jumped, putting extra strength in the leap to get well clear of the phantom. I made sure to relax my knees and core muscles as I plummeted through the air, going into an immediate crouch when my boots hit the dirt. This absorbed most of the force of my landing, allowing me to spring back up with little hindrance.

I felt a sharp pain in my upper arm, swearing as I was jerked back by the force of a Human bullet, my energy shields flaring up as they absorbed what would otherwise have been a gunshot wound. I had to get to cover, and fast—and then I got my bearings, looked around, realized that there was no cover. We had been dropped in the middle of a valley of sorts—while there were gentle, rolling hills to our backs, in front of us lay a much steeper ridge, covered with moderate foliage.

The Humans owned that ridge. I could faintly see their fortifications—metal barriers, sandbags concealing their heavy machineguns, crudely-dug trenches and foxholes for their infantry to cower in. They had the age-old advantage of the high ground, but we had the even older advantage of being Sangheili warriors. The Human vermin were in for an education that they likely would not survive.

One would normally expect chaos upon a landing like this—hundreds

of warriors being dumped into a kill zone from an air wing of phantom dropships while under fire—but, surprisingly, our insertion was incredibly organized. Upon hitting the dirt, our lancemasters kept us together, preventing any of us from charging the Humans before the rest of the crèche was ready. Field Officer 'Neiasree, acting on orders from the Field Master, whipped the Q'Rumno's Third Element into loose formation. Seven lances, roughly a hundred and fifty warriors, moved to the Field Officer's call.

The other four Elements did likewise, moving into their places in the advance. With each new battle, the five Elements of the Q'Rumno cycled through which Element would assume the center position in the advance. This day, that honor belonged to the Second Element. The Third Element—which my lance was part of—was given the far right position. It was one of the more exposed positions in the advance, but with the Urapos Legion reinforcing us—

I heard Field Master 'Inanraree shout an order, which was relayed promptly by the Field Officers, and then by the lancemasters.

Advance.

The hundreds of warriors that made up the Q'Rumno Crèche, oronos and astiros alike, let out raw-throated battle cries as we surged forward.

As we began the advance, I could not help but make closer observations of our surroundings. The valley we had been dropped into was covered with yellow tall grass that came up to my chest in some places. The earth grew soft and muddy in patches, but not badly enough to hinder the advance. There was a gentle breeze drifting through the valley, bringing with it the sweet scent of spring.

It would not be long until that wind smelled like ash, blood, and death. I enjoyed the fresh vernal scents and odors while they lasted, taking in deep breaths through my nostrils.

The Human ridge was less than two kilometers distant, but that was still two kilometers of mostly open ground that we had to traverse. Closer to the ridge, giant trees with white leaves started to grow in clumps and groves, and there were a few rock formations scattered around the approach. There would be some limited cover up ahead, but it would still not be much.

No matter. We were warriors of the Covenant. We would take that ridge even without that meager cover up ahead. The Humans would know what it meant to cross the Q'Rumno in combat.

Big words for one who hides behind the protection of energy shields.

I blinked several times, started by that sudden thought. It had been the voice of Uros 'Oenairemee, the man who'd raised and trained me. Whenever I started to grow cocky or arrogant, I'd always hear his advice, his raspy voice bringing me back to reality. The Quartermaster had said more or less the same thing, back aboard the _Sacrosanct_. I took several more deep breaths, guarding against losing myself in bloodlust.

I kept my breathing rate constant as I sprinted forward through the grass, keeping abreast of my brothers. Y'mir ran alongside me to my immediate right, Rhuvan ahead of me and to my left. Directly in front of me, Heran—the youngest member of our lance—was running as fast as he could, but he'd never been the fastest of sprinters. He was beginning to tire.

Numbness was the only thing I felt as Heran's head exploded suddenly, spattering my face with purple blood and bits of brain matter. A faint vapor trail hung in the air for an instant from the bullet that had killed Heran—it had been fired by a Human sniper. I forced myself not to think of the sniper; there was nothing I could do to avoid being sniped, so best to put those thoughts out of my mind. If I were fated to be felled in such a manner, it's not as if I would hear the shot coming.

Though I could only see it out of my peripheral vision, I noticed that some of the losses we were taking were strange—a warrior would be sprinting through the grass, only to be suddenly engulfed in a fiery explosion, sent flying into the air. Blood and limbs would go flying, and I could hear the screams of the wounded.

Landmines. My mandibles twitched in disgust. Landmines were some of the most underhanded weapons I've ever seen the Humans use. There was no way for a warrior to defend against them—they were coward's weapons. And the worst part was that they were not even designed to kill us, but to maim us. I felt a pang of sorrow for the warriors who had arms or legs blown off by the mines—by nightfall, those maimed warriors who survived would likely commit suicide in shame.

Then the light artillery arrived. I heard the familiar, high-pitched howl of the Human mortars before the shells came screaming down on our heads. Warriors who were struck by the mortar shells rarely left more than limbs and ashes behind as physical evidence that they had ever existed. One shell landed not far to my left. I winced as my hearing was plagued by a terrible ringing.

Something warm and wet struck my helmet; perhaps a hand, or an arm. I didn't look.

"Mind the skies, brothers!" Nuren shouted to be heard over the fighting. "The Calamity's End approaches! The Urapos have arrived!"

I spared a glance over my shoulder, looking to my right. Sure enough, a giant naval vessel was emerging from the clouds. It was indeed the Calamity's End, one of the fleet's five assault carriers. I could see its torpedo bays warming up—in about half a minute or so, the Humans on the ridge would be the ones to get the living hell beaten out of them. Advancing through Human artillery and metallic-based weaponsfire was no walk through the meadow, but it was nothing compared to being subjected to a rain of plasma.

Accompanying the Urapos Legion would be much-needed support vehicles. Tanks, fast-attack vehicles, hopefully Mgalekgolo bond brother warriors, as well. Once we had wraith tanks and possibly even a banshee air wing to suppress the Human defenders, we would tear through the ridge like an enraged wild grahla crashing through a forest. Already, I could see the first of the spirit and phantom

dropships leaving one of the assault carrier's hangar bays; they carried the Vanguard units of the Urapos, which were always deployed before the main forces to ensure a stable landing zone.

When Heran 'Avamee met his violent end right in front of me, the surprise I'd felt had been a very numb one. But when I saw an explosion of blue flame roar out of a gaping hole that had suddenly been torn in the hull of the _Calamity's End_â€¦ My mandibles fell slack with shock. The booming report of whatever Human weapon that fired that shot came a split-second afterward, echoing up and down the valley.

I watched the _Calamity's End_ falter in her course. There was a second, larger explosionâ€”this one caused by the ship itself, not the Humansâ€”that sent more flame shooting out of the wound in the assault carrier's hull, causing large chunks of the ship to be blown clear. The assault carrier began to list heavily to port, trailing fire and smoke as it fell from its course.

"By the Godsâ€¦" Oros murmured, his voice muted with horror. "That was a direct hit to the engine coreâ€¦"

The assault carrier would have had to weaken its energy shields to allow the air wing transporting the Urapos Vanguard to leave the hangar bays. The Humans must have concealed a mass driver nearby, or perhaps one of the heavier magnetic cannons that they used as primary weapons for their navy. Whatever it was, it had been powerful enough to blow through the _Calamity's_ weakened shields and its hull armorâ€¦and it had been lucky enough to strike the assault carrier in one of the worst possible spots.

I could feel my hearts sink a fraction as the _Calamity's End_, lacking engines, fighting in vain for her life, plunged into a gradual nosedive. Perhaps already knowing that his ship was doomed, the helmsman of the _Calamity's End_ was able to steer the falling assault carrier so that it fell on the opposite side of the hills that were behind us, and not into the valley that we were trying to advance across. If the assault carrier had crashed in this valley, the resulting explosion may well have consumed us all.

We all felt the shockwave generated by the massive vessel's impact. There was a colossal explosion of blindingly bright white light, blue and white flame, and millions of chunks of debris. After the initial light faded, a massive column of smoke began to climb into the sky.

The breeze no longer smelled like spring.

The surviving dropships that had managed to get clear of the _Calamity's End_ came in for a landing behind us and to our right, and the units of the Urapos Vanguard were swiftly deployed. Along with them were a few wraith tanks and fast-attack vehiclesâ€”ghosts, mostly, and a bare handful of revenants. They would help, butâ€¦ Alone, they would not break the Human lines.

The Urapos Legion would have brought in dozens of wraiths and air support, not to mention multiple thousand ground forces. It was an integrated combat legion, so it comprised of lances of Unggoy footsoldiers led by Sangheili officers, supported by Kig-yar sharpshooters and snipers. But nowâ€¦all that manpower, all that

materiel, all those reinforcementsâ€¦ Gone.

But it mattered not. Reinforcements or no reinforcements, the Q'Rumno Warrior CrÃ©che always moved forward. Perhaps someday we will come up against a defense that will prove too strong for us to overcome, and perhaps that day was todayâ€¦but we were going to do our damndest to make sure that it was not.

But even so, if it wasâ€¦ Well, then we will all take the Journey together. This would be a good death.

As we continued to make our way through the tall grass, a familiar swooping sound descended on us from above. A squadron of five banshees flying in tight wedge formation emerged from the clouds far ahead of us. They rapidly shed their altitude, flying low to the ground. They were heading straight towards us, intending to attack the Human defenses from behind.

The skies around the fighters lit up with anti-aircraft fire. Rather than break formation to fall into strafing patterns, however, the five banshees all stubbornly held their formation, not breaking the wedge even as the fighter on the far left lost a wing to the flak, rapidly spinning out of control and slamming into the earth somewhere out of sight, trailing fire as it fell from the sky.

The remaining four banshees dipped even lower to the ground. As they neared the Human ridge, the surviving fighters all released their payloads before breaking off their run and rocketing away back into the sky. Four blindingly bright bolts of crackling green lightâ€”fuel rod projectilesâ€”streaked away from the banshees that fired them. They made impact at a place in the Human defenses that we could not seeâ€¦but judging by the volume of the resultant explosion, they had obviously hit something sensitive.

Perhaps they had just neutralized whatever had killed the _Calamity's End_. Maybe we would receive more reinforcementsâ€¦?

That had been a fool's hope, at best. I knew we would not receive reinforcementsâ€”all the ground forces that the Fleet of Righteous Fervor had at its disposal were being deployed to their own landing zones, and they each had their own part of the Human defenses to try and breach. The Issio Warrior CrÃ©che, I knew, was mounting its own assault further to the northeast, supported by the Alatar Legion. There were at least half a dozen other warrior crÃ©ches from the various fleets that had been dispatched to this world, all working in tandem with several integrated combat legions.

The only way for us to be reinforced was by having another unit, somewhere else, be deprived of their support, which would never happen. The commanders would never choose to benefit us at the expense of others. No, the Q'Rumno was on its own. But retreat was not an option, making it quite clear that our goals had not changed. They'd just become a bit more of a challenge.

It was not long until we came within range of the Humans' small-arms. Now we were taking fire from their infantry, and I could see the distorted shimmer of flaring energy shields everywhere I looked. But the axe bit both ways; now we could shoot back.

I brought my carbine up to my shoulder and peered through the scope.

The Humans were difficult to spotâ€”their camouflage-pattern clothing allowed them to blend in with their surroundings, somewhat. I squeezed off several shots, aiming for one of the Human machinegun emplacements. They were protected by sandbags and other defenses, so it was not as if I was shooting at wide-open targets.

My first few shots seared into the emplacement's defenses, splitting open the sandbags at the very top. The sand did not pour out, however; the superheated radioactive projectiles that the Type-51 Carbine used actually melted the impacted sand to a charred, blackened substance. It was probably glass; it just wasn't transparent due to the scorching. The other shots went right over the emplacement.

"_Forerunners' dung,_" I muttered under my breath, stooping to blasphemy to express my extreme dissatisfaction.

Come now, Aten. You are a better shot than this.

This time, I stopped at one of the groves of trees, seeking shelter behind the largest of the white-leaved behemoths. Another deep breath. I recalled my Guardian's training, relaxing my arms and shoulders, allowing my mandibles to slacken a bit. When all these little muscles tensed up, it would throw my aim off very subtlyâ€”most of the time, the effects of minor tension in the muscles were unnoticeable, but when you were shooting at a longer rangeâ€”|

I could see the Humans manning the machinegun emplacement. There were two of themâ€”one of them was firing the weapon, while the other fed a long belt of ammunition into machinegun as it burned through the larger-sized rounds. I could not make out their individual features at this distance, but this was no issue. All I needed to see was the shape of their bodies.

When the time was right, I held my breath and squeezed off three more shots. The first round struck the Human gunner in the head. Even at range, I could see a faint spray of red as the Human's head snapped back. It was dead before its brain could even register the hit. The second Human reacted to the death of its comrade a bit more quickly than I anticipated, so my second shot merely struck the vermin in its shoulder. My third shot missed altogether.

The Human was not dead, but it had fallen behind the safety of the defenses, so I could not finish it off. Even so, it would not be operating anymore machineguns, which was a victory in its own right.

"Why do you cower behind a tree, brother?" It was Oros who had spoken. The yellow-eyed Urassan was covered in blood that did not belong to him, and he ran with a slight limp. Obviously he had been delayed during the advanceâ€”too close to an exploding landmine, perhapsâ€”but now he had finally caught up. "The vermin lies ahead!"

"A Human machinegun emplacement has just fallen to my rifle," I replied. I did not take Oros's comment personally; it was simply how he spoke. People from the Urassa Desert were not well-known for being tactful. "More will follow."

I could not see what Oros's reaction to that wasâ€”the Urassan merely gave a low grunt and continued moving forward, nonchalantly stepping over the bodies of our fallen brothers. A heavy round slammed into the tree I was hiding behind after Oros left, but the tree was thick enough to stop the bullet from harming me.

As it would turn out, my decision to remain at the tree would prove to be vital. From behind, as I continued to pick off the Human machinegun emplacements, I found that, strangely enough, I was beginning to get a feel forâ€”not necessarily how our advance was organized, butâ€”It was hard to explain. I found I had an innate awareness of the battle that I'd never noticed before. This was the first time I had ever hung back to act as a sharpshooter.

As I watched everyone continue to advance on the ridge, much of it made sense to meâ€”the placement of the lances in concert with one another, the way certain warriors were able to move through the enemy weaponsfireâ€”how melee-oriented warriors sprinted the fastest, hoping to reach the Humans first, while those more proficient with rifles tended to hang behind.

There was a loud explosion off to the right. I spared another glance, watching as a wraith tank was blown onto its side by the force of a landmine exploding under its far right side, causing it to flip over. The turret gunner was reduced to a bloody pulp as the wraith pretty much fell on him. The driver was actually able to escape, howeverâ€”only to have the left side of his head get blown off before he even got back up to his feet. His wraith's incapacitation had obviously caught the attention of a Human sniper.

I turned my attention back to the advance, just in time to see the Gods piss on our fortune. I saw Field Officer 'Neiasree at the front of the advance, keeping the men in loose formation, keeping the advance moving forward. As he neared the ridge, howeverâ€”It was a mortar round, one of the Humans' light artillery units. It did not hit the Field Officer, but it might as well haveâ€”it struck the ground perhaps twenty meters away from the officer, killing at least five warriors upon impact.

As for Field Officer 'Neiasreeâ€”I watched his shields shimmer and fizzle out as they absorbed much of the force of the explosion. They were not enough on their own, however, and the Field Officer was thrown to the ground like a dead tree in the middle of a winter storm. Whether unconscious or dead, the Field Officer was motionless on the ground. He was not getting back up.

The Third Element had just lost its commander. I watched helplessly as the warriors at the very front of the advance quickly lost their cohesion and momentum, splintering into individual groupsâ€”each group trying to take on the Humans by themselves. The lancemasters continued to howl orders, but there was only so much they could do without a unifying leader.

Perhaps it was a flaw in our rank system, having the effectiveness of a unit depend so heavily on the survival of its key officersâ€”but it was the way it had been for millennia, and we were not about to change it. Stillâ€”as I saw these flaws actively affecting my unit's ability to achieve victory, I could not help but stew in my own thoughts.

I saw the members of my own lance not far ahead. But our misfortune had not yet passed. Even as I watched my brothers near the ridge, I saw Nuren fall to a knee. He had been struck in the chest by a Human sniperâ€”the hit had depleted the lancemaster's energy shields, knocking the wind out of him. He probably would end up with a massive bruise, possibly a cracked rib or two.

I knew Nuren was swearing up a storm, even if I couldn't hear him. The older warrior staggered back up to his feet, limping forward one stepâ€”only to be knocked flat onto his back when a stray bullet tore through his abdomen. This time, the lancemaster did not get back up. Leaderless and disorganized, I watched as my brothers lost their momentum. The ones who'd sprinted the fastest were quickly pinned down behind the trees at the bottom of the ridge.

The advance was stalling.

For the sake of clarification, you must not think that I was hiding behind my tree for hours on end, watching my brothers charge ahead of me while doing nothing to aid them. In truth, everything I just saw had taken place within the span of ten or fifteen seconds. I had been in one place for far too long, so I broke cover and ran as fast as I could through the tall grass, quickly catching up to my brothers.

I knew what needed to be done for us to secure our part of this ridge. It was simple in theory. We still had Rhytos, our heavy gunnerâ€”Y'mir and Oros still drew breath, and they were the two best swordsmen in the lanceâ€”Rhuvan was also skilled with the blade, as were Imad and Sallan; they all lived, still, as well.

In order to succeed, I would have to group the swordsmen together and send them forward into a weak point in the Human lines. And while this happened, I would have to get everyone else to advance much more slowly and lay down a continuous barrage of suppressing fire on Human defenders, which would in turn allow the swordsmen to assault the Human trenches directlyâ€”Rhytos would be key to this plan.

But as I caught up to my brothers and tried to get them to listen to me, I realized how utterly hopeless my strategy was. No one was listening; either they could not hear me or they were ignoring me. I suppose I was not too surprisedâ€”I am one of the more quiet members of my lance, easily forgotten in the presence of my brothers with much more dominant personalities. I've never been given a leadership role, nor have I ever sought one. It made sense to me why my brothers would not all of a sudden follow commands issued by meâ€”

But still. Even if they argued with me, even if they outright refused to listen to meâ€”That would have been preferable to them simply ignoring me. I was not so submissive that I would not get angered by my voice and will falling on deaf ears. My hearts were clenched with a mild rage borne of frustration, but I forced myself to clear my thoughts. Losing myself to impatience would gain nothing.

I took yet another deep breath, looking all around me. Everywhere I looked, I could see warriors being struck by Human weaponsfire, their shields desperately trying to maintain enough power to keep them protected. We were taking lossesâ€”that was nothing newâ€”the Q'Rumno lost warriors every time it entered combatâ€”but the rate at which we were taking losses was too great. If this went on for very much longer, there would no longer be a Q'Rumno Warrior CrÃ©che.

But I was not looking at my fallen brothers. Instead, a new plan was forming in my head. It was insane, desperate. But when I turned my thoughts to my Guardian, when I waited for the voice of Uros 'Oenairemee in my mind to deter me, to tell me how foolish my tentative plans were, I heard nothing. And when I turned to my own instincts, waiting for the impulse to abandon my plan, to simply join the failing charge on the Humans, to die a glorious death and take the Journey, again, I felt nothing.

Strange. Dying a glorious death in battle was a fate coveted by all Sangheili warriors. The opportunity to do exactly that was staring at me right in the face, but I did not want to take it. It was not that I was not ready to die, it was more a sense of not wanting to die in that manner. I didn't want to be killed because I gave up on the battle, if I was going to take the Journey today, I want it to be because I came close to achieving victory and died for my efforts.

This, too, would be a good death.

My plan mostly-formed in my mind, I changed tack and hurried over to the rock formation where Y'mir, Oros, and Rhuvan were hunkered behind. I was struck by Human weaponsfire twice as I made my way over to them, once in the hip, a mere graze, and once in my left side. I swallowed another stream of profanity as I took the second hit; I've been shot more times than I cared to count, and I knew that I would have a bruise from that hit that would take weeks to heal.

But, ultimately, I reached my three brothers in one piece. Unlike trying to rally an entire lance, it would be a far easier undertaking to get my two closest friends to listen to me. And when Y'mir and Oros were onboard with the plan, Rhuvan would follow. I got their attention quickly, I actually had to slap Oros lightly up the back of his helmet to snap him out of his blood rage.

I outlined my new plan to them, expecting a torrent of arguments and incredulity, especially from Oros, but, to my amazement, my brothers barely needed convincing. Oros muttered something about fool's errands, as well as the intelligence of highlanders, my ethnicity, but he was still with me. Rhuvan said nothing, merely tightening his grip on his plasma rifle and giving a single nod.

"Quite the cocktail of desperation and insanity you have brewing in your mind, Aten," Y'mir chuckled, checking the charge on his energy pistol. The islander then rose back to his feet, gesturing for the others to do the same. "But the way things are going, maybe a little insanity is what we need!"

"If insanity is what we need, who better to provide it than a highlander?" Rhuvan muttered in agreement, most likely stealing the words right out of Oros's mouth before the Urassan could utter them.

Personally, I think that ethnic highlanders like myself are quite boring and sane when compared to the island peoples, especially those who hailed from the Taham Archipelago, but if ethnic stereotypes were going to help me out, here, then I was glad to embrace them.

The four of us set off at a breakneck sprintâ€|only instead of trying to charge up the ridge along with the rest of our brothers, we headed off beyond our right flank, where the sad remnants of the Urapos Legion were trying to regroup. We ran as fast as we could, knowing fully well that every extra minute it took for us to get my plan in motion would needlessly claim the lives of more of our brothers.

It took us less than two minutes to reach our goalâ€|the overturned wraith tank that I had witnessed driving over a landmine. A hail of Human bullets tore up the ground right in front of me as I reached the tank, causing me to backpedal out of reflex. But this was only a minor inconvenience.

I was easily the fastest runner in our lanceâ€|hell, in our entire Element, come to think of itâ€|so I inevitably reached the overturned wraith tank first. I hurried over to the side that was higher up in the air and got down low, wedging my shoulder under the chassis for extra purchase. I threw all my weight into the tank, straining with all my mightâ€|but I could not budge it nearly as far as I needed to, not on my own.

This did not come as a surprise. Though I was twenty-two cycles old and technically in my prime, I was rather short for my age, not to mention wiry. While I was gifted with speed and moderately good marksmanship, I was certainly not the strongest of warriors. I am obviously not a weaklingâ€|my Kaidon would not have given me the honor of joining the Q'Rumno if I was a weaklingâ€|but most of my brothers simply had far more brute strength through the grace of genetics.

Y'mir, Oros, and Rhuvan arrived at the tank after my failed first attempt. Not needing any direction from me, they all joined me on the one side of the wraith, adding their combined strength to my own. Between the four of usâ€|though credit was due more to my three friends than to myselfâ€|we were able to, on our second collective attempt, give the wraith tank a powerful enough shove to roll it over its own side and back down onto its underbelly. It was now right-side-up. Right-side-up and waitingâ€|

"Any of you know how to drive this pile of excrement?" I asked the others.

Y'mir could only shrug. "We know as much as you do. However, seeing as how commandeering this wraith was your idea, Aten, perhaps you should be the one to try!"

"I'll second that," Oros interjected, laughter just barely visible underneath his words.

Let it never be said that I have shied from a challenge. Making sure my carbine was secured to my back, I climbed up onto the wraith's chassis and hopped into the cockpit. "Piss and shitâ€|" I swore, my mandibles nearly going slack as I studied the wraith's controls. "How do you turn this Gods-damned thing on?" I called out to my fellow warriors.

"Did you try the power button?" Rhuvan suggested. Though I could not see the younger astir, I could almost picture the shit-eating smirk that he probably had on his face. Astiros of the Third Element were

certainly a strange peopleâ€¦ trust us to still have the capacity to crack jokes at one another even as the battle fell to pieces around us.

Irritation spiked through my hearts, making my face flush purple. "How about a suggestion from someone with an intelligence greater than that of your average rock!"

"Don't be so hard on yourself, Atenâ€¦" we all know you're smarter than most rocks!" Rhuvan shot right back.

"Y'mir, you had better shut him up before I accidentally misplace a carbine round somewhere in his throat!" I growled, sweeping my gaze over the controls, trying to find whatever served as the 'on-switch', so to speak.

The controls comprised primarily of panels that displayed readouts on the functionality of the wraithâ€¦ apart from the light beating the right-side propulsion thrusters had taken, the wraith was still functional. Beaten and battered, certainlyâ€¦ but still functional. Lining the top of the control board was a plethora of touch-sensitive control panelsâ€¦ perhaps one of them would fire up this tank. And finally, set into the board, closer to the middle, were two spherical controls that were wider than my hand; one on the left, one on the right. Maybeâ€¦

"_Aten!_" I heard Oros shouting. "Do you see any controls that stand out from the rest? There will probably be two identical controls that do not look anything like the rest of the-"

"Yes, I found two controls!" I yelled back, cutting my friend off midsentence. "You think they control the power?"

"I have no idea!" Oros's reply was. "But the most important controls usually stand outâ€¦" that is one of the first things I was taught as a youngling!"

Having absolutely no idea what I was doing, I decided to rest both my palms on top of the spherical controls. Upon making physical contact with the spherical controls, they suddenly came to life, one glowing with a soft blue light, the other a muted red. There was a gentle humming noise as the wraith's boosted gravity propulsion drive was engaged, causing the tank to rise about half a meter into the air.

As this happened, the cockpit automatically sealed itself. The open armor plates rearranged themselves into a roof, granting me full protection from enemy weaponsfire. There were no actual lights for the interior of the wraithâ€¦ the cockpit was already sufficiently illuminated by the control board.

Then, once the cockpit was sealed, four display panels flickered to life. Two of them were directly in front of me; one large, the other small. The larger one showed me a frontal view of what lay in front of the tank. The smaller one, tucked underneath the large one, offered a rear view. If I ever needed to, there was probably a way to invert the two views, to make the rear view occupy the larger monitorâ€¦ but I did not have the time to figure out how to do that.

The other two display panels were located on either side of the one in frontâ€”not too close to make everything seem jumbled, but also not so far apart that I would have to turn my head to see them. These two panels showed me the side views of the wraith, and they were as small as the rear view feed.

I was startled by the wraith's sudden reactivation, and I took my hands off the spherical controls. Luckily, this did not cause the wraith to go dormant again. After the tank was fully functional, waiting to be driven, I decided to try and find the steering controls. I dropped my left hand back onto the red sphereâ€”but I ended up accidentally pressing the control down. It popped right back up, so I obviously did not break anything, butâ€”

My comrades all swore at the same time and dove out of the way as the wraith's main cannon fired a massive bolt of plasma straight into the ground not too far from where they had been standing. I struggled to fight down the urge to start pounding the control board in rage. As I moved my hand and rolled the red sphere forward within its fixture, a targeting reticule appeared in the front view feed, showing the main cannon's aim as it was shifted to a much safer distance.

"By the Gods, you hemorrhoid-sucking, piss-brained fool, are you trying to kill us?" Oros was so angry he was practically frothing at the mouth.

So, the red sphere obviously controlled the plasma mortar that served as the wraith's main cannon. Ignoring the storm of abuse thundering down on me from Oros 'Kusovee, I placed my right hand back onto the blue sphere. This sphere was differentâ€”however far I rolled it in any direction, it would always return to its center position. I edged it forward tentatively, my mandibles parting in a triumphant grin as the wraith started to move forward.

As I started heading towards the Human defenses on the ridge once more, I fiddled with the controls even more. There was a panel on the floor which, when pressed by one of my feet, would cause the wraith's propulsion drive to have a power spike, giving the tank an extra burst of speed. So that was how it was doneâ€”

The other significant thing I was able to do was to open the cockpit ceiling. The ceiling split back into its separate armor plates, retracting. The cockpit was now exposed, and me along with it. I realized that I was currently too good of a target for a Human sniper to pass up, so I had to make this quick. "Apologies for the mishap with the cannon! You may all feel free to have your vengeance on me after we take that ridge!" I offered a brief apology in an attempt to placate my brothers, who were still a little steamed at having nearly been atomized by my trial and error. "Rhuvan, climb into the wraith's turret and give me a hand! Keep your head lowâ€”Human snipers will send you on the Journey if you expose yourself too much! Oros, return to our brothers; seek out Imad, Sallan, and Aerratâ€”if they yet draw breath, rally them and give instruction to advance on the Humans behind the wraith the instant I catch up with you!"

"You list the names of those who favor the sword." Oros caught on fast. "Cowering behind a wraith to advance on the Humans? They will not like this."

"You are the best swordsman in the Third Element, Oros; they have

respect for you. Intimidate them, threaten them, beat themâ€do whatever it takes to ensure they follow my instructions!" I was careful to call them 'instructions' and not 'orders'. They pretty much were orders, but I was not any kind of leader, and so 'orders' were technically something I could not give.

As Rhuvan clambered into the turret gunner's nest in the front of the wraith, allowing me to continue moving the tank forward, Oros gave a single shrug and absconded, running back to rejoin the stalled advance.

"Does the humble islander get an important mission?" Y'mir called up to me, jogging alongside the moving tank.

"I need you to rally the rest of the lance, Y'mir," I said to my brother astir. I was really getting nervous of the Human snipers, so I spoke fast. "Those who favor the rifle stand equal in importance to the swordsmenâ€they must advance alongside this wraith and lay down heavy suppressing fire upon the Humans; they must keep the vermin down in their holes. Seek out Rhytos and put him in charge of the othersâ€if they wish their skeletal structures to remain intact, they will not disobey himâ€|"

My voice almost sounded like it belonged to someone else. Who was this person who was attempting to assume tactical control of a failing battle? Who was this person who was giving orders to his fellow warriors? Who was this person who was suddenly acting like an officer? Was it really me?

After instructing Y'mir to regroup with Oros and the other swordsmen after he completed his task, the dark-skinned islander set off towards the ridge, running faster than a sand-serpent fleeing a hungry red vulix. I resealed the cockpit, choosing to ignore the sniper round that glanced off the wraith's armor not five seconds afterwards.

No time to worry about what might have happened when one was commandeering a slightly-damaged wraith tank in an effort to salvage a failing assault. I hit the floor pedal, boosting the wraith's speed as often as I could, gunning for the ridge. Within a minute, the cockpit was filled with the sounds of bullets impacting the wraith's armor plating. I clicked my mandibles in irritation, but that's all the bullets were; an annoyance. I focused my attention on the ridge ahead, trying to see how much further the situation had deteriorated. The entire right wing of the Q'Rumno's advance, which was the Third Element's position, had all but crumbled. Warriors left and right were attempting to charge their way up the incline of the ridge, fully ready to take on the entire Human defense all on their own. Newer recruitsâ€dead men and inexperienced oronosâ€made up the majority of those who pressed the ridge without proper forethought or cohesion. Brave warriors, every one of them.

They had good deaths.

As for the rest of the Q'Rumno, the advance was stalling. Without the support of the Urapos Legion, we had been reduced to a menacing snowman that had just been stripped of claws and teeth. Somewhere out in that bloodied mess, Field Master 'Inanraree was trying to keep the advance going. Yes, the advance had been virtually stopped at the very bottom of the ridge by the staunch Human defenseâ€but I believe

that Qel 'Inanraree was the sole reason why we had not yet been completely routed. The other field officers did their best to maintain discipline among the other four Elements, but I continued to see more and more of the newer, less seasoned warriors succumb to their emotions and descend into a blood rage, breaking cover and storming up the hill, sometimes armed only with an energy blade. None of them made it very far before being either sniped at long range, or simply torn apart by overwhelming enemy weaponsfire.

I felt nothing as I watched the inexperienced warriors get cut down. After surviving in the Q'Rumno for as long as I have, one quickly grows desensitized to witnessing younger, untried recruits dropping like brown flies. They were expected to die.

Yes, it had only been a few cycles ago when I had been one of those younger, untried recruits—but, while most of the other oronos I knew had taken the Journey, I had survived. And the same would happen with these warriors—a small number of them would eventually survive to join the ranks of the astiros, having learned from the mistakes of their fallen brothers. Such was the way of things.

And as more and more of the stubborn youths tried to be heroic and charge the defenses towards the top of the ridge, the astiros of the Third Element remained hunkered behind cover, neither advancing nor retreating. Some of the more perceptive oronos had taken note of this, opting to join their more seasoned brothers rather than join their more foolish brethren on the ridge.

The ridge itself was covered in green foliage and plantlife. It was moderately wooded—there were enough trees to provide the enemy with ample cover and concealment, in concert with the underbrush. In many places, however, the green foliage had been tramped into the dirt by the ill-fated oronos. The bodies of dozens of our brethren now covered the lower slopes of the ridge, blood mixing in with the dirt and turning it to mud. It was quite a sight.

And still the astiros held their positions.

An untrained eye would assume that the veteran warriors were pinned down, unable to maneuver through the enemy firepower. An untrained eye would assume that the astiros were on the defensive—this simply was not true. They were not afraid of death, but they also had no desire to waste their lives on a currently-fruitless endeavor; unless, of course, they were ordered otherwise, or if there was absolutely no other possible course of action.

The astiros did not cower behind cover—they waited behind cover. They waited to see if a weakness would present itself in the Human defenses, or if Fate conspired in their favor in some other way. But they would not wait for long—sitting still in the thick of a heated battle is not within our nature. Sooner or later, the astiros would take the Journey on their own terms and charge.

At all costs, this could not be allowed to happen.

The wraith sped through the valley, plowing right over the tall grass. Mortar rounds began to explode around us, but we were lucky enough to evade being struck. Within the minute we were coming up on the ridge, and I was secretly surprised to find the members of my lance waiting for me, ready to follow me uphill.

Though he could not see me, Y'mir offered a savage grin as I maneuvered the wraith past him. He was ready to end this. He and Oros moved into cover behind the wraith, joined swiftly by Sallan, Imad, and Aerratâ€”the other swordsmen. Whatever Oros had said to the other swordsmen had obviously worked, for none of them tried to run ahead.

My speed slowed a bit as the wraith started to move up the steep slope of the ridge. I kept my left foot almost constantly bearing down on the floor panel, allowing the wraith's propulsion drive to release excess energy every few seconds in the form of an extra burst of speed. Even more Human weaponsfire focused in on my tank, the noise of hundreds, thousands of bullets striking the armor plating almost unbearable inside the cockpit.

I was certainly getting the Humans' attention.

Rhuvan let out a raw-throated cry and opened fire with the wraith's forward-mounted turret, sending a rapid-fire hail of plasma charges hissing and searing their way into the enemy defenses. The Human trenches and foxholes were located three-quarters of the way up the ridge's slope. I could see the individual vermin now, firing at us from behind sandbags, concrete barriers, fallen trees; anything that would give them shelter from our plasma.

As of now, I knew I would have to keep moving as fast as I could. Humans may be vermin, but they were resourceful vermin. They would incinerate me if I gave them enough time to catch their collective breath. My first target was another enemy machinegun emplacement directly aheadâ€”it was not firing at me, yet, but that was not the issue. The issue was that it was preventing Rhytos and the rest of the lance from accompanying me uphill without getting torn to ribbons. And there was nothing more vulnerable than a tank without infantry support.

I ran my palm against the red sphere that controlled the main cannon, aiming the plasma mortar upward. I pressed the orb down, firing the main cannon, eyeballing where the shot would land based on the targeting reticule. The roiling bolt of plasma arced up from the wraith's main cannonâ€”but it fell short, slamming into the hillside several meters shy of the Human defenses. The enemy machinegun emplacement continued to clatter.

No matter; it was not as if the main cannon could only fire once.

I compensated from my previous shot to make up for the extra distance needed, sending a second plasma bolt crackling into the sky. Because we were moving uphill and the Human defenses were not very far away, the plasma bolt had a flat arcâ€”it did not shoot high up into the sky like it usually did when fired from the main cannon of a wraith. And this time, my aim was true; the plasma bolt landed directly on top of the enemy machinegun, atomizing the weapon and instantly killing the two Humans who had manned it. The protective sandbags that had been placed around the emplacement had been melted to glass.

I heard a thunderous shout from somewhere behind the wraith. Checking the wraith's other view feeds, I could see Rhytos and the others finally able to fully break cover, moving uphill at a steady jog to

rejoin my forward push. The rear-view feed showed me the group of five swordsmen still hunkered behind the wraith, moving up with the tank, no doubt muttering impatiently under their breaths.

With the rest of the lance no longer pinned down by that machinegun emplacement, they were able to immediately begin hitting the Human defenses with suppressing fire. I noticed the difference instantly in the reduction of noise from the beating the wraith's armor plating was taking—"not as many of the vermin were able to fire at me without being in danger of getting fried themselves.

Nudging my aim a bit to the left, while also remembering to lower the arc a hair to compensate for the wraith's forward movement, I fired the main cannon a third time. The third plasma bolt struck the felled tree that had formed the fortifications adjacent to the now-nonexistent machinegun emplacement. The makeshift barrier may have stood up well to plasma charges and caseless projectiles, but getting hit by a bolt from a plasma mortar was quite a different affair. Much of the tree was atomized, and whatever parts of it that remained were set aflame and scattered.

If there had been any Humans taking shelter behind that tree, they had almost certainly passed from this world.

We pressed on, never taking a single step backwards. Though I was not paying attention to anything beyond our advance, I was aware on some level that there were no other warriors in sight that had made it this far up the ridge. No warriors from the other Elements advanced up through the wooded incline to our left. We were still alone.

At one point, when we were halfway to the Human lines, I spotted the vermin attempting to set up another machinegun, likely intending to catch Rhytos and the others while they were out in the open. Fortunately, those Humans were quickly slain by a sustained burst from the wraith's support turret—"Rhuvan had spotted them, too.

With the pace of the advance being set by the wraith, our forward push did not lose its cohesion. The swordsmen kept right up behind me while the riflemen ended up fanning out on either side of my tank, maintaining their suppressing fire. They were taking hits—"there was never a time when I did not see someone's shields flaring from the enemy firepower.

From the side-view feeds, I saw one of my brothers fall—"he had taken a burst of lead to the gut, which caused his already-depleted shields to fail—and then a sniper round struck him in the head before he could recover. There was a purplish-red spray of blood, bone, and other bodily matter—"half of the astir's mouth was blown away, along with a good portion of the back of his head. What was left of his head was snapped back by the force of the bullet's impact, and the dead warrior's corpse fell to the ground.

The fallen astir's name had been Cex, and I had not known him very well. Like me, he was one of the more quiet members of our lance, and so I had probably spoken to him only two or three times in all the time I've been a part of this lance. Even so—he had been an astir, and an honored brother.

Unlike when I had been watching the oronos throw themselves into the

meatgrinder, earlier, I could not help but feel a tendril of rage worming its way into my hearts. Veteran warriors had a very paradoxical view of death where their close friends and fellow seasoned warriors were concerned. When those close to us in battle took the Journey, we felt gratitude for our honored brothers being able to die as warriors should.

At the same time, however, being plunged into the fire of war always forged unbreakable bonds between warrior. When a veteran warrior took the Journey, the bonds he shared with his brothers were broken, and it was the sundering of those bonds that could weigh heavily on our souls for a time. Warriors were much more accepting of death than most, but to claim that we were unaffected by it would be a falsehood.

I did not have any time to dwell on Cex's passing, however. The sniper struck three times more—the sniper had my attention, now. The first shot struck another of the riflemen in the head. Luckily for my brother astir—a talkative, amiable warrior by the name of Dhyne, hailing from one of the more outlying island-states in the Taham Archipelago—his shields had been at full strength when he was struck, and they were able to absorb the hit; Dhyne's shields were depleted, however, and he was knocked out cold, collapsing to the ground.

An unfamiliar warrior, likely one of the handful of oronos who had wisely chosen to remain with the astiros of my lance rather than meet their ends by prematurely charging up the ridge, quickly stepped in and picked the unconscious astir up, bearing the veteran on his shoulders. The oron was doing the unconscious astir a great service. We had no qualms with leaving our dead behind—corpses were only empty shells, after all. Dhyne was still alive, however, and leaving him behind would likely bring dishonor upon him.

If we took the ridge, we would bring Dhyne with us—that way, in a sense, he would have taken part in the final victory. This particular logic was by no means airtight, but warriors decided to ignore that fact when it came to preserving the honor of a comrade. Dhyne had fought well, and he did not deserve to have his name stained over this.

I spared a split-second to get a good look at the young recruit who bore Dhyne, committing his face to memory. I had barely managed to accomplish this before the second sniper shot struck Rhytos in the left upper arm. He had been carrying a detached plasma turret, identical to the one being used by Rhuvan, unloading its high rate of fire on whatever part of the Human lines up ahead that seemed to be the strongest. He lost his grip on the heavy weapon and found himself unable to pick it back up—though the sniper shot had obviously not penetrated his shielding, it had likely broken the bone of Rhytos's upper arm.

And, still in quick succession, the third shot actually hit my wraith. I could actually feel the shock of the high-velocity projectile's impact, and the light from the controls flickered ever so slightly. If the shot had hit the weaker armor that protected the cockpit, it probably would have left a noticeable dent. As it was, that shot had come perilously close to Rhuvan's head—likely without even knowing it, Rhuvan had started to grow bolder as we gained ground, peeking his head up farther and farther from the gunner's

nest until it became a presentable target.

Rhuvan swore loudly, ducking his head back down out of instinct.

As for me, I turned the wraith to the left, rotating the blue steering sphere counterclockwise a little bit. The wraith continued to move uphill, only it was now angled to the side. I had seen all four sniper shots, and after watching the final shot strike my wraith's outer armor, I finally knew where that sniper was located—a foxhole that had been dug behind the main line of trenches to our left, concealed by branches and leaves. I could not actually see the sniper, but the faint, short-lived vapor trails left in the air by the high-velocity rounds had given the Human's location away.

I nudged the red control sphere forward, increasing the trajectory arc of the main cannon before pressing the sphere down. I overshot by quite a bit, much to my chagrin. But I had gotten the hang of the wraith's plasma mortar surprisingly fast, and my bombardment of the Human defenses had given me a feel for how flat the main cannon's trajectory arc should be for certain ranges. I fired again—and while I was much closer to the foxhole, this time, the plasma bolt impacted off to the side.

Firing a mortar while moving partially sideways was not easy. After my second failed shot, I could see a Human emerging from the foxhole, bearing a large, scoped rifle that likely would have stood greater in height than the Human, were it upright. No doubt about it, that was the sniper. I quickly readjusted the main cannon's aim and ended up firing twice more—but the sniper Human was too fast, and after my fourth shot missed, it was able to completely evade me.

Cursing my ill fortune, I pointed the wraith straight ahead once more, turning the firepower of the main cannon back onto the Human trenches up ahead. By now, not much of the fortifications that had reinforced the trenches and foxholes remained, blown away by the power of the wraith's mortar. Many Humans remained, however, stubbornly refusing to abandon their entrenchments, taking what cover they could in the ashes of their defenses.

By now, we were perhaps twenty meters from our goal, and the Humans redoubled their efforts to repel us. The riflemen were forced to frequently take cover behind trees to allow their shields to recharge—the enemy weaponsfire was more accurate and struck with greater force at close range. If the riflemen did not take the time to let their shields regenerate, they would have all been torn to shreds by now.

I rained plasma bolt after plasma bolt into the ruins of the Human defenses, until the wraith drew so near that I could no longer aim the main cannon at the enemy. Rhuvan was still keeping the Humans disorganized and pinned with the forward-mounted turret, however, so it was not as if the wraith had lost its teeth.

Ten meters.

Though I could no longer use the main cannon at this range, I continued to drive the wraith forward, intending to get the swordsmen behind me as close as possible to the defenses before they had to break cover. In this manner, the wraith tank had been more or less

relegated to a crude shield for Y'mir and the others. I decided that once I came within-

Sudden movement.

As if it were a mole tunneling up through the earth, a Human suddenly rose to his feet from within another foxhole that had gone untouched by my attacks with the main cannon, located behind the trenches and slightly off to the right. I saw the movement in my peripheral vision, flitting my gaze over to investigate. The foxhole was deep enough for the Human to stand up within and still have only his upper body exposedâ€”presenting a much smaller targetâ€”and concealed well enough to go unnoticed by either Rhuvan or myself.

Then my sense of time seemed to warp, making it seem like I was watching in slow motion as the Human in the hidden foxhole brought a large, somewhat bulky weapon up onto his shoulder. I recognized that weapon, and it was the last thing I wanted to see my body leaped into action before my mind could even catch up. I heard myself screaming at Rhuvan to get out of the gunner's nest. The younger astir's reflexes were equal to my ownâ€”that was the main reason why I asked him to man the turret. He'd probably been just about to get clear, anyway, even before I'd warned him.

While Rhuvan jumped out of the gunner's nest, I hit the icon on the control board that opened the cockpit ceilingâ€”good thing I had figured out how to do that beforehand. The view feeds fizzled out as the cockpit ceiling parted, splitting into individual armor plates and folding itself back. By the time the cockpit was open, the Human had its bulky weapon resting on its shoulder, already aiming straight at me.

As I started to rise to my feet, I noticed a laser-thin ray of red light flickering through the air. It had probably been pointed at the front of the wraith, but now it shined on me, formed a tiny dot of red light on my stomach. It started to flicker rapidly.

Adrenaline roared through my body. The last thing I did before leaving the cockpit was to stomp my foot down on the floor panel, sending the wraith speeding forward towards the defenses. I then whipped myself around and, in a single bound, managed to leap out of the cockpit and onto the top portion of the wraith, where the plasma mortar had retracted back into the chassis. I landed, ignoring a sharp pain in my back as my shields deflected yet another bullet. I sprinted forward, stepping down on my right foot and using it to propel me away, leaping off the back of the wraith tank.

My feet had only just left the top of the wraith when the thin ray of red light suddenly exploded into a giant beam of destructive, blindingly-bright red energy. The laser tore through the armor of the wraith as if it were boring through paper. The tank immediately blew up underneath me when the laser detonated the propulsion driveâ€”though I only remember the feeling of the explosion, not the sound of it. I felt as if I'd been smacked by a hand the size of a dropship.

I felt the air rushing past my armor and flesh, as well as a curious lack of solid matter underneath my feet. Surely I should have landed by nowâ€”Was I flying? Was I even still alive? Had I gotten off the wraith in time? Did anyone-

For the second time in the space of a minute, my thoughts were interrupted. This time, however, it was not interrupted by my instincts and reflexesâ€”it was interrupted by the trunk of a large, white-leafed tree as I slammed right into it.

I remember seeing stars, maybe even a flash of white lightâ€”everything had been a blur. Now, there was darkness. Darkness, and soundsâ€”I concentrated on the sounds, trying to hear them more clearly. They sounded familiar, but distant, far awayâ€”almost as if I was hearing them underwater.

Gradually, the sounds started to gain more depth and clarity, and I recognized them as the sounds of a battleâ€”the hiss of plasmafire, the loud reports of Human weapons, distant explosionsâ€”and lots of voicesâ€”battle cries, orders being shouted, agonized screamsâ€”I could still see only darkness, though.

That was when I started to think somewhat clearly again, and I realized that my eyes were closed. I opened them, blinking rapidly as they adjusted to the light. I was lying face-up at the base of one of the trees. How had I managed toâ€”? Ah, yes. The wraithâ€”

My hearts were pounding furiously. There was still an unbelievable amount of adrenaline coursing through my body; I think that was the only reason why I was able to get back on my feet and move without drowning in pain. I could still feel the painâ€”but, like the sounds of battle a few moments ago, it felt distant.

The pain would spike whenever I put too much weight on my right leg, momentarily piercing through the pain-deadening effect of the adrenaline and causing me to gasp for breath before subsiding. I could not move very fast, and when I did, I had to limp.

The wraith tank had been blown to pieces. The base of it lay on the ground in front of the Human trenches, consumed by flames. A few more large chunks of the tank had landed further down the hill before coming to a restâ€”I recognized part of the wraith's frontal armor from the convexity of its surface; I also recognized the main cannon's mount, as well as a small portion of the actual plasma mortar. The rest of the tank had been reduced to small bits of debris that now lay scattered all over the hillside.

As I started limping forward, weakly managing to retrieve my carbineâ€”which had miraculously remained magnetically clamped to my backâ€”I was finally able to begin getting my bearings back, all the blurred, disjointed memories of what had just happened settling into their proper places.

I must not have been unconscious for very long, for my brothers were only just now charging into the Human defenses. It did not look like anyone had been wounded by the wraith's destructionâ€”when I'd hit the floor panel boosted the energy output of the tank's propulsion drive, the wraith must have gained enough distance to explode without taking the swordsmen with it.

The swordsmen were six in number, now that they were joined by Rhuvan. While I struggled to make my way back to my brothers, I watched as Oros let out a roaring cry, his mandibles stretched wide open. The yellow-eyed Urassan was ahead of Y'mir and the others,

sprinting the final few meters to the trenches. Several Humans concentrated their fire on him, and Oros's shields shined brightly as they worked to protect him.

Fortunately for Oros, his shields did not fail until he was right on top of the defenders. Upon losing his shields, Oros jumped into the air, leaping over the charred remnants of the fallen tree I'd blasted earlier with the wraith's main cannon, bringing his sword slicing down as he landed. The unfortunate Human in his path was effortlessly decapitated, its headless corpse crumpling to the ground.

While the swordsmen leaped into the trenches and started clearing out the vermin, the riflemen quickly caught up and made their way along the Human defenses, firing indiscriminately into the trenches and foxholes. I was not at all surprised to see Rhytos still among them, wielding a fuel rod cannon with only one hand.

When I reached the trench, the initial resistance had already been crushed. Dead Humans—most of them having been killed by the intense bombardment I'd rained on them with the wraith—littered the ruins of the defenses. Those who had survived my efforts with the wraith had swiftly met their ends when Oros and company stormed the trench, clearing the vermin out.

Once a foothold had been established, Oros and Y'mir took the swordsmen left, and they set upon the Humans stationed further on down the line. I wanted to join them, but there were still Humans left in the foxholes that had been dug further on back. Rather than join the swordsmen in their efforts, I remained in front of the trench, keeping my carbine ready. Whenever a Human emerged from a foxhole, I would put a round through its forehead.

No, I was no longer leading the glorious charge and whatnot, but I was perfectly fine with that. My adrenaline rush was fading, giving me more and more frequent glimpses of the bruising pain that awaited me. My right leg, the one with the limp, was really starting to hurt, as was my face. I paid it no heed, though, not even looking down to inspect how bruised I must be after being blown up and subsequently smashed into a tree.

As Fate would have it, one of the Humans in the foxholes happened to be the same one who had blown up the wraith tank, leaving me in the nearly dysfunctional state that I was in right now. The Human was not in the same foxhole as before, but there was no doubt that it was the same one—the fact that it was still wielding that bulky laser weapon also helped confirm its identity. My face twisted into a scowl at the sight of that particular Human. I raised my carbine and put a round through the Human's neck rather than its head.

I wanted its death to last a bit longer than those of its comrades.

And while the swordsmen continued to push left, in the direction of the rest of the Q'Rumno, I remained here, getting the riflemen organized and in position to repel attackers when Human reinforcements from their lines to the right of our advance—where the Urapos Legion was supposed to have attacked—started arriving in an attempt to retake this position and seal the gap in their lines.

My sense of time, already off a bit from the whole wraith ordeal, vanished completely. I probably stood my ground for a few minutes, doing my best to drive back any Humans who tried to engage us, felling them with careful shots from my carbine while ignoring the occasional bullet that would hit my shields. But to me, it felt like I was holding that position for hours, until every movement I made felt mechanical, robotic.

I was only dimly aware of my rifle-wielding brothers who held this part of the trench with me. I knew Rhytos and all the others were here with me, keeping the Humans at bay, but I barely noticed them. Every last shred of energy and focus that I possessed was going into continuing to aim and fire my carbine, not to mention reloading it if it went dry.

I was methodical, taking my time with my aiming, always remaining patient. And while sometimes it would take me two or even _three_ shots to get a killâ€”I must have had a concussion, because my aim was offâ€”none of the rounds from my carbine ever missed. My throat was dry and my armor felt heavy. Weariness had set into my bones, but I did not falter. I _could_ not falter.

Someone laid a hand on my shoulder, but I shrugged it off. The Humans were swarming us, nowâ€”hundreds of themâ€”Every time I killed one, three more would take their place. There was no end to them-

The hand seized my shoulder again, gripped it tightly, jerked me around. I tried to fight it off, struggling to continue suppressing the Humansâ€”but then I was slapped, suddenly, on the back of my helmet. The sudden blow acted almost like a splash of cold water to my face, bringing me back to lucidity. I found myself facing none other than Eolis, the veteran astir who oversaw Q'Rumno's newest recruits when they fought their first battles.

Eolis shouted something at me, but I could not hear his words.

I looked past him, my mandibles falling a little slack as I saw dozens of warriors streaming up the ridge, pressing advantage against the Human defenses, weakened by the efforts of Oros, Y'mir, and the others. It was the rest of the Third Elementâ€”and further in the distance, I could see the warriors of the First Element doing likewise.

I looked back to our right flankâ€”and stared silently at what I saw. There were no Humans charging usâ€”only a couple dozen corpses. Corpses and dust. The hundreds of Humans, the unending onslaught I had been fighting againstâ€”Where had they all gone?

My carbine fell from my grasp. I suddenly became aware that I was now looking up into the sky. I was lying on my back, now. Curiousâ€”how had I ended up on the ground? Colors looked much more pronounced, and my vision was beginning to lose its sharpness, shapes starting to blur. There were faces looking down at meâ€”Eolis, and several others whose exact features I could not quite make out. I only caught snippets of what they were saying.

"â€”_clearly hallucinatingâ€”_"

"â€”_are saying he rallied his lanceâ€”_"

"â€¦losing too much blood, keep applying pressureâ€¦"

Summoning the last of my strength, I somehow managed to lift my head from the ground, looking down at my body. My right leg was drenched in blood, flowing from where a jagged shard of armor plating from the wraith tank protruded from my thigh. I stared at it uncomprehendingly, as if it were some kind of puzzle that refused to be solved. How could so much blood come from my leg?

The last of my strength melted away and my head fell back.

Darkness closed in.

End
file.